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CRITIQUING BRAHMANISM

A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

K. MURALI (AJITH)

INTRODUCTION

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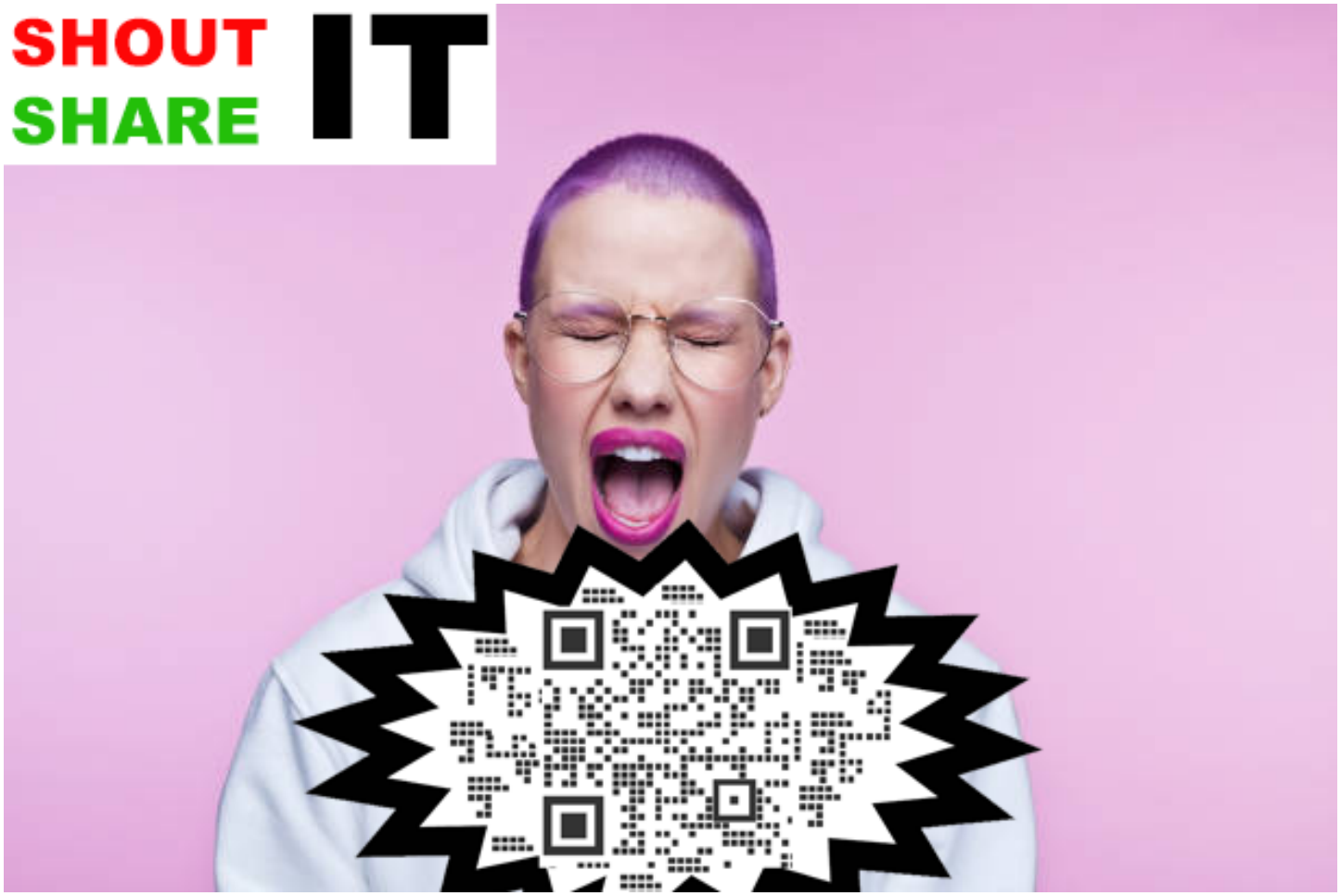
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K. Murali (Ajith)
Political Science

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"Brahmanism and Capitalism,
these two
are the real enemies of the workers."

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

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Preface to the Second English Edition

A reprint of this book had been pending for some time. Apart from correcting some typos and adding a footnote to clarify that the Sankhya philosophy that is being referred to is the version propounded by Easwarakrishna, the text as such remains. A translation of the preface to the second Malayalam edition has been included. While writing that preface, a debate on the views expounded in 'Critiquing Brahmanism' was going on in the Maruvakku monthly. Since my rejoinder was being published in that magazine, almost simultaneous to the publication of the 2nd Malayalam edition, most of it was excluded from the preface. It has now been incorporated in the English translation.

The lead essay of this collection, 'A Brief Introduction to Brahmanism', argues that we must differentiate Hinduism from Brahmanism. This is contested by some who insist that both are identical. They consider Hinduism to be a *savarna* belief system. Among them some also argue that the Dalits and intermediate castes, the *avarnas*, are not Hindus. Those who hold this view point out that the term 'Hinduism' took form during the colonial period. Before that, religious identity was expressed as Shaiva, Vaishnava, Shakteya and so on. *Savarna* individuals identified themselves by their caste. The Dalits and other *avarnas*, treated as 'untouchables', had no place in this whole scheme.

So far as the facts go there is no reason to disagree. I have pointed out how Bal Gangadhar Tilak himself had used the term Hindu quite sparingly in the 'Geeta Rahasya', though the work as such was subtitled 'The Hindu Philosophy of Life, Ethics and

Religion'. However, we must start from the present if we are to face up to Brahmanic Hinduvadi fascism. History should surely be drawn on. But it cannot be the starting point. At present, apart from those who have converted to other religions, Dalits consider themselves as Hindus. They worship Hindu gods. This is also the case with the intermediate castes. However the grip of Brahmanism among them, especially the Hindu Dalits, is considerably less when compared to the *savarna* Hindu castes. It would make better sense to build on this, rather than trying to convince them that they are not Hindus.

While Hinduism is heavily influenced by Brahmanism it is not identical to it. As I have pointed out, "Hinduism was (and is) by no means a monolith. It is a broad range of belief systems with many visible divergences." Variances in the degree of Brahmanism's influence can readily be seen, if one probes these differences. Hinduvadi forces have been trying to establish a particular North Indian Vaishnava belief system and its rituals as THE standard. In recent years this has been intensified by the RSS. Despite that, diverse Hindu belief systems continue to exist and thrive. This is why it is both possible and necessary to differentiate between Brahmanism and Hinduism.

Brahmanism is an extremely divisive ideology. Caste is the material basis and manifestation of this inborn characteristic. No matter how much it tries to construct a uniform Hindu identity, the casteist arrogances and biases of the *savarnas*, with those from the Brahmin castes at the forefront, cannot but get expressed. This can already be seen in the open claims being made by Brahmin-born officials about the caste-given superior capabilities of their kind. They are the least bit concerned about how such statements violate the Constitutional norms they are supposed to uphold. The more explicit and aggressive the expression of Brahmanism in the hegemonic consensus of the ruling classes, the more aggravated this will be.

The RSS is trying to handle this contradiction by symbolic deeds and words. Modi, born in an intermediate caste, doing the

inaugural puja at the newly being built Ram temple is an example. Mohan Bhagavat decrying caste and *varna* at an annual RSS meet is yet another. Meanwhile harsh reality keeps butting in, without any remit. We see this in the meets of the priests. There Brahmanism gets displayed in all its hideous casteist, patriarchal, racist colours; no holds barred. Hence, anti-Brahmanism linked to the annihilation of caste and the material relations underpinning it, is a potent weapon to derail the Brahmanic Hinduvadi fascist project, which tries to make the basic masses, particularly the Dalits and Adivasis, its foot soldiers. Clubbing Brahmanism and Hinduism will block us from wielding it. It will be counterproductive. It will help the *savarna* fascists to cover up their inherent weakness.

Many thanks to Com: VV for his Introduction and Com: N. Venu for making time to translate it into English. Thanks also to Com: Hari for the cover and Com: Prashant, of Kanal Publication Centre, who willingly takes up the drudgery of post-publication work. This book has already come out in Telugu and Tamil. Salutes to the comrades in Telangana and Tamil Nadu who made great efforts. I am informed that work on a Kannada edition too is underway. All of these initiatives are being undertaken, braving extremly trying circumstances. One of the comrades active in bringing out the Tamil edition is now interned as a UAPA prisoner. Though not directly related to his involvement in publishing this and other books, that too would have played its role in the decision of the state to imprison him, paying scant regard to his ill-health.

But that is how it will be as the aggressive fascist attacks of the Sanghi government intensify and resistance too steps up to meet that challenge. Come what may, we must persist. This new edition reasserts that will.

Murali (Ajith)
December 2022

Preface to the Second Malayalam Edition

A second edition of 'Critiquing Brahmanism' becoming necessary so soon is indeed a matter of great encouragement. Yet, the responses to the views it had put forward stood in inverse proportion to this enthusiastic demand. Haridas's critical overview in the 'Truecopy', the debate in 'Maruvakku' monthly, Ajayan's Facebook comment, and Sajit Kumar's review in goodreads.com were the exceptions. Apart from these, Varalakshmi Puduru has reviewed it in the Telugu cultural magazine 'Arunatara' and Devin Shaw in the online magazine 'Marx and Philosophy Society'. Readers would be expecting my response.

Divakaran has argued that caste has its specific essence and ideology. Does it have an ideology different from Brahmanism? The critique is to be necessarily centred on Brahmanism. When the argument is made that *chathurvarna* is the ideology of caste, it will get deviated from this. Similar is the case with the view that the colonial rulers had forged an alliance with Brahmins in the pre-1947 period. I had pointed out the formation of a *savarna* bloc during the colonial period and its refurbishment of Brahmanism as its ideology. Today, the *savarnas* as a whole form its social base. It is wrong to ignore this and reduce the matter of Brahmanism to Brahmins alone.

Divakaran analysed caste as a form of social division of labour which is not related to commodity production. He summoned Marx to attest this. I am of the view that the observations made by Marx relying on incomplete and, at times, wrong information cannot be accepted as such. Particularly after Kosambi. Social division of labour without commodity production was not

something seen in South Asia alone. It existed in all pre-capitalist societies, throughout the world. Why did it take the form of caste over here? Caste is not the direct carry-over of the division of labour seen in *varna*. Kosambi had demonstrated how castes took form as a result of the particular manner by which tribal peoples were assimilated as part of the spread of Brahminic civilisations. Ignoring this and repeating Marx's views on this matter would be taking a step back, both in theory and practice.

Another important issue raised by him is that of the positioning of Brahmanism within modernity. Which modernity are we talking about? In my opinion, this is the main question. Divakaran doesn't address it in a rigorous manner. I had pointed out the problem of colonial modernity and its particularities, as also the specific nature of comprador-bureaucratic capitalism that emerged and grew up under the aegis of imperialist domination. In this light, I had also explained why Brahmanism exists as the ideological core of this class too, like in the case of the landlord class. What then can one make of his avoiding all mention of this and criticising me of failing to position Brahmanism within modernity?

The most important point raised by Divakaran is that pertaining to philosophy. He is unsatisfied with my critique of Sankara because I haven't done it from the viewpoint of Hegel. The fact is that I really didn't think that was necessary. And I still don't see any reason to change my thinking. First of all, I was trying to critique the monism in Sankara's Advaida in the light of the arguments of that philosophy itself. This I did by pointing out how its inherent contradictions negate it and how he had to rely on another philosophy to get out of this predicament. My aim was to show how the claims made by Brahmanism on the unchallenged superiority of Advaida is baseless. Secondly, I don't agree with his crediting Hegel of carrying out a deep study of Indian philosophy. The South Asian philosophical tradition contained many idealist schools that acknowledged the existence of an objective universe. Some of the Saiva schools and Jaina philosophy

can be cited. Ignoring this, Hegel opined that, "The Idea was not acknowledged objectively in Indian philosophy. Therefore, the external and objective was not grasped in relation to the Idea. This is a weakness of Oriental philosophy." While he demonstrated a familiarity with Indian philosophies like Sankhya, for Hegel 'Indian' philosophy was Advaida. His criticisms remained within the bounds of this orientalist understanding. Hence one cannot say that he had made a deep study of Indian philosophy. What remains is the matter of criticising the views of EMS and others who have more or less equated the monism of Sankara's Advaida with that of Hegel. But that is something I've already done.

Incidentally, I had been reflecting on a tangential issue which can be put forward here for deeper consideration. What was the historical source of the Sankara-Hegel comparison? Hegelian thought had come to colonial India through a group of scholars known as the British Hegelians. Some of the proponents of that school had served as college principals and professors of philosophy over here under East India Company rule. They were the conduit, transmitting Hegel to our philosophers. Colonialism enthroned Advaida at the pinnacle of South Asian thought. On the other hand, Hegelian thought too arrived here through colonialism. This gave rise to a philosophical stream that discovered identities between Hegel's Absolute Idea and Advaida's *nirgunabrahma* and expounded on this theme. One sees this in KC Bhattacharya and Halder. Do we see continuities of this Orientalist construct generated by colonial modernity in the 'Marxist' expositions of EMS and others? This is something worth examining.

In my opinion, Ambedkar's views on caste are more insightful than those of Marx. His observation that caste is more than a division of labour, it is a division of labourers, has great importance. This teaching shows us the decisive importance of the struggle for the annihilation of caste in our context in the matter of acquiring proletarian consciousness. Similarly his pointing out the graded morality of the caste system is also of great

help in the articulation of new democratic and socialist cultures and values. A Marxist must surely value these contributions. Acknowledging that they were made by Ambedkar, not Marx, does not in any way reduce Marxism. Nor does this stand in the way of criticising the drawbacks seen in Ambedkar. My essay 'Brahminism a Brief Introduction' contains this, to the extent called for by the subject matter. It noted that his contributions "stand out in their depth and comprehensiveness", in comparison to the anti-Brahmanist critiques that had come up in that period. That doesn't mean that the errors in his theory and practice are being denied.

Now about the relation between caste and class. Divakaran states that Marx had given a 'comprehensive' understanding of their relation. Then, in the same paragraph, he agrees that Marx's observations were preliminary in nature. The fact is that even these preliminary observations were made in the light of incomplete knowledge. This prevented Marx from differentiating between *varna* and caste. Later he had arrived at a more advanced understanding, as seen in the notes contained in his 'Ethnological Notebooks'. While commenting on Morgan's work, he posed this question – "Can the gentes lead to the formation of caste, especially when aggression is combined with the gen principle?" In the light of Kosambi's views on the matter, this gives an orientation that is very relevant, calling for deeper study. Incidentally, the observation that "caste is an enclosed class" was made by Ambedkar at the very beginning of his theoretical work. He hasn't amplified on it in his later works.

I couldn't understand the sense of Divakaran's view that social class is a universal concept abstracted from world history. Categories such as class and caste are abstractions from social relations. Contrary to his understanding of the matter, class and caste are not universality and particularity, respectively. Both are universal concepts. He ends up arguing that "caste is in essence class" because of his misconceiving these categories as universality and particularity. Going by his views one would have to

consider caste as the manifested form of an essence, that is class. Merely stating that caste is "not just" a form of class doesn't provide a way out. You end up in EMS's mechanical view where caste is only an apparent form of class. I have explained my understanding of the relation between class and caste in the essay ' On the Laws of History', published in the collection 'Of Concepts and Methods'.

Divakaran has mentioned TK Ramachandran's view that Advaida established its dominant position during the Gupta period. The reasoning behind this view is not clear. The Gupta period is considered to begin from 4 CE. Sankara appears on the scene some three or four centuries after that. Though Hinduvadis celebrate the Gupta period as a 'Golden Age', Buddhist philosophy was dominant in the philosophical realm during that time. This continued at least till 12 CE when the Nalanda University, was destroyed. Buddhist schools, and not Advaida, were prominent there. Given this position of Buddhist philosophical schools in the leading university of South Asia in those days, historical facts won't allow one to conclude that Advaida was dominant from the Gupta period onwards. Moreover, as I point out in my book quoting Jonardan Ganeri, new schools of Nyaya Vaisheshika were the main topics of philosophical debate in leading centres, such as Varanasi and Navadweep, around the time of the entry of colonial forces into the sub-continent. This was what attracted students of philosophy from all over South Asia to these centres.

Yet another criticism raised by him is about my argument that contradictions inherent to Advaida, the philosophical, social and theological issues it couldn't resolve, made space for the emergence of the schools of Ramanuja and others. He declares that this is a metaphysical view. In his opinion, changes taking place in the material sphere led the initiators of those schools to the reinterpretation of spiritual texts. I have no quarrel with admitting the role of the material sphere. But, those trained in a dominant philosophical system don't seek out something different merely because of the impulses given by the material situation. Most of-

ten, these material conditions will be acting indirectly, without their being aware of it. Instead, the new comes up from their attempt to resolve the contradictions they notice (or are exposed by opponents) within the dominant school of thought.

Divakaran complains that the rebuttal I give to Sankara's 'rope and snake' example is a rationalist one and cannot serve the purpose. I had posed a question — What would be the fate of Sankara's argument if one were to replace the rope with a stone? My purpose was to demonstrate that in Sankara's example the mistaking of one for the other occurs in a comparison made between two previously known and similar objects. The question of where and how the observer acquired this knowledge remains unanswered. Hence Sankara's conclusion isn't logically drawn from this example. Rather, the example itself becomes the logic. This becomes evident when one does the replacement I suggest. Interestingly, while he rejects this as rationalism, he has approvingly quoted a similar argument from Madhva!

According to Divakaran, selfless service to the people guided by Communist ideals and the *nishkamakarma* of Brahmanism cannot be considered as opposites. The only thing he has to say in substantiation is this — the former is an ideal advanced by Marx in the capitalist period, while the latter is that of the *Chathurvarn*a age. I simply couldn't understand the logic of declaring that two ideals cannot be opposed to each other merely because they took form in two different social systems. He has gone on to accuse me of being a positivist since I said that the selfless service of communists for the people is guided by their spirit of self-sacrifice and this is realised through their participation in class struggle. What is positivist about a statement that indicates both the ideal guiding a practice and the practice actualising that ideal? The accusation is that I have substituted self-sacrifice in place of revolutionary praxis. Isn't class struggle what we mean by revolutionary praxis? Is there a revolutionary praxis separate from class struggle? When communists participate in revolutionary praxis, in class struggle, aren't they actualising the

ideal of self-sacrifice, of serving the people? Anyone is of course free to conceive an imaginary world with communists and class struggle where none of this applies. One doesn't know if that is what he has in mind. In that case there is no point in arguing over this. To each his world... till the world decides to step in.

Sadanandan's main criticism is about the references made to the Samkhya philosophy. He wrote, "According to 'Critiquing Brahmanism' Balgangadhar Tilak seeks to establish that the dualism of Kapila's philosophy was of assistance in negotiating the monism of Advaita and that this was made possible by depending on the *purusha* concept seen in it."

In my preface I had noted Tilak's narative on how "Advaita explains the sensuous universe and Maya by taking help from the dualism of Samkhya." Further, in the essay 'The limits of absolute monism' I point out that, "Advaida attempted to borrow from Samkhya's *prakriti-purusha* dualism in order to escape from this trap gifted by absolute monism." There is no mention of Kapila philosophy in these instances. Deviprasad Chattopadhyaya has argued that the original Samkhya didn't have a *purusha* concept. Through rigorous analysis he has established that the logic of that philosophy doesn't give any room for such a concept. Kapila is acknowledged as the founder of this school. But its authoritative text, the 'Samkhyakarika' is from a later period – 4 CE. It was authored by Easwarakrishna. This text and its various renderings were taken as representative of the Samkhya philosophy in South Asian philosophical debates. Tilak was continuing that practice. I have added a note in the new edition to clarify the difference between the original Samkhya and what is currently known as this philosophy.

Sadanandan has quoted Dr. N.V. Unnithiri's words, "Samkhya's theory on the origin of the universe based on evolution, the view that the whole of this sensuous universe came into existence through the evolution of nature, is one of its main contributions." This is totally wrong. The credit for being the first to advance the idea that the sensuous universe took form through

multiple combinations of some primordial elements certainly goes to Kapila. But the *prakriti* of Samkhya and 'Nature' in evolution theory are not one and the same. This a false equivalence, something that has always been a stock trade of Brahmanism's advocates in their attempt to 'prove' that all sciences have their origins here. Moreover, even in its original form, the 3 *gunas* (qualities) of Samkhya *prakriti* are intrinsic to it. That is, they are already present. Hence, Samkhya can only conceive of the transformation of pre-existing *gunas*, and not of the emergence of new ones. This is exactly what is seen in its time old example of the curdling of milk. As explained in 'Critiquing Brahmanism', "The chemical composition, structure and nutritional qualities of curd were not pre-existent as an "unmanifest" in milk, its constituents or the bacteria causing curdling. All of them were newly emerged qualities. Samkhya and Advaita refuse to accept this." Fat is already present in sesame seeds. This is what gets pressed out as oil. But that is not the relation between milk and curds. Moreover, once curdling starts, the bacteria transforming milk into curds becomes internal to it. It is no longer an external element.

Haridas agrees with my observation that Advaida's anointment as the prime philosophy of Hinduism in the 19th century was something effected through colonial orientalism. He goes on to point out that there is a lack in this argument in as much as the circumstances leading to it have not been analysed. That is true. I had admitted this in the preface and pointed out that it calls for further study. Haridas has also argued that failure to distinguish between the Sangh Parivar fascists' deployment of "*Unity in diversity*" and its use by forces opposed to them would gravely deplete the anti-fascist camp. For the record, I haven't ignored the difference in emphasis in the usage of this Brahmanist saying by the two sides. But that is not really the crux of the matter. This is the crucial issue of ideological clarity, so vital in any social practice. Should we accede to ideological vagueness for the sake of broadening the resistance to the aggressive variety

of Brahmanism promoted by the Sangh Parivar gangs? The answer will be provided by our views on the ultimate aim of this resistance. Not to return to the previous status but to advance to a new society where basic democratic tasks, including that of caste annihilation, will be fulfilled — that is why we need to face up to Brahminic Hinduvada fascism. The CPI-CPM parties weaken this mission by upholding the Gandhi-Nehru tradition and chanting Brahmanic *suktas*. Ideological clarity enriches and strengthens the anti-fascist camp. It will never be an obstacle to flexibility in practice.

In Ajayan's view, "Accepting the view, in a mechanical manner, that ruling class ideas become the ruling ideas of each society and declaring this to be an eternal truth is not Marxism." He has quoted from 'German Ideology' to substantiate this. But I couldn't understand how such a meaning can be read into those quotes. They deal with the subterfuge employed by a Stirner, of the Young Hegelian group, who was trying to establish the hegemony of ideas in history. Marx exposed the 'tactics' Stirner was employing to achieve this. First, he must separate the ideas of those ruling 'for empirical reasons, under empirical conditions and as empirical individuals', from these actual rulers, and thus recognise the rule of ideas or illusions in history. Thus he must arrive at conceding the rule of ideas, that is of illusions, in history. This is the first step. In other words, we must accept that ruling ideas become the ideas of the rulers, instead of the ideas of the rulers becoming the ruling ideas. In the latter case the material basis of ruling ideas becomes clear. It reveals how specific types of ideas became dominant (become dominant) during the rule of each specific ruling class. In the former case, some self-asserted ideas become dominant by themselves. The answer to how this happened can only be supplied by some transcendent power.

Marx had explained this quite clearly in another part of this work, titled 'Ruling class and ruling ideas' by the publisher. (Chapter 1, part 2 of 'German Ideology') "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is

the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance." In view of this, I couldn't make out the error seen by Ajayan in my noting that the ideas of the ruling class of a society become its ruling ideas. He was planning to clarify the points raised in his Facebook post as well as write a detailed critique. That hasn't yet been done because of his ill-health. I hope this debate can be continued once he is able to fulfil it.

Sajith Kumar, writing in goodreads.com, is of the view that though caste is continuing in 'some parts' of the country, "Clearly, the state is on the side of the victims. Unlike the past we are now advancing with a clear sense of direction against caste atrocities. Even then a section of intellectuals wish to perpetuate enmity between castes forever. They will continuously repeat the list of past atrocities in order to fan up the fire. They don't like the path of reconciliation. They prefer to give stress on making the Dalits take up arms against the others. The aim of these Maoist intellectuals is to destabilise the country according to the interests of China!" Apparently, 'Critiquing Brahmanism' has scored where it matters most!

Though the Brahmanist intellectuals of our times run around praising the greatness of the past, the method of debate practised in those days is quite alien to them. In that style, the antagonist's views would be painstakingly set forth before entering into its critique. While this was equally true of Brahmanist thinkers, it is simply impossible for their present day followers. Hence, instead of replying to criticisms made on the basis of facts in the same factual manner, they adopt the fascist method of distorting

the critique and replying as they wish. Here is an example. "In a work critical of Brahmanism, the lack of a definition on what is Brahmanism is a grave weakness. In some places the Brahmins are attacked. In some other places it is Hindu religion. At yet another point it is the Indian nation. Then the middle class. Thus the list of the author's enemies keep on lengthening. All of them are brought under the umbrella of Brahminism."

First of all, the book was not a comprehensive study on Brahmanism. All it does is to introduce its particularities, mark its position within the ideology of the Indian ruling classes, point out the transitions that have taken place in this and expose contemporary attempts to legitimise it. Instead of addressing its observations, made within these confines, what is the point in accusing it of failure "to define Brahmanism"? My book is a critique of Brahmanism as an ideology, not of Brahmins. Quoting Dr. Ambedkar it points out that this has influenced all classes and castes. Furthermore, it argues that it has penetrated all religious communities too. A reasoned argument is made on the necessity to differentiate between Hinduism and Brahmanism. The middle class has nowhere been portrayed as an enemy. Then why is Sajith Kumar wilfully distorting its content? The mind of the Hindu, Brahmin, middle class reader, swayed by Indian nationalism, must be stoked with suspicion and hatred against the views propounded by the book, right at the very outset. This is the method of fascism, blocking independent thought and enquiry.

Sajith has also written, "The readers are keen to know the opinion of the author about nationalities of the countries forcefully occupied by China such as Tibet and Xinjiang – even though it is known that he is unlikely to give an opinion displeasing the Chinese masters!" Quite necessary, indeed. But this is not the place for that. I will just mention something for his enlightenment. Maoists believe that present day China is a social imperialist country. It ceased to be a socialist country in 1976 itself, when capitalist roaders seized power.

Devin Shaw's review centred on the observation made in the book that Brahmanism is the core of the ideology of all the ruling classes in India. He then applied this theoretical approach to analyse 'settler-colonial' countries like the United States and Canada. The claim made by the ruling classes of these countries that "we are a nation of immigrants" is critiqued by Shaw. This is the core of settler-colonialism's ideology. The 'we' in it conveniently covers up the displacement suffered by the indigenous peoples of those countries and the forced emigration suffered by Afro-Americans.

The stand of fascist organisations guided by white racism is an extreme form of this approach. A 'moderate' form of the very same approach can be seen in bourgeois liberal politics. If fascism is to be defeated forever, the conditions that gave birth to it, capitalism and settler-colonialism, must be destroyed – such is the conclusion Shaw draws from this. This is similar to capitalism and Brahmanism becoming twin enemies in our context. In view of this, he goes on to establish that all views that fail to address the specificities of the anti-fascist struggle and reduce it to the struggle against capitalism, as well as those that would limit the anti-fascist struggle to the restoration of bourgeois liberal values, must be rejected. Although we live in widely differing conditions and face unique challenges, Shaw's review once again reminds us that there is always a lot to share and learn from each other.

The essays collected in this book were written with the aim that they should be of assistance in understanding contemporary politics and sharpening ideological clarity in the ongoing struggle against Brahmanic Hinduvadi fascism, at a time when Hindu rashtravad, rooted in service to imperialism, is moving in a planned manner, with all of its horrific features, to swallow the country. This new edition reasserts that hope.

Murali (Ajith)
October 2021

Preface to the First Edition

Keen on learning Marathi, using the forced idle time I would have to spend in the Yerwada Central Prison (Pune), I decided to proceed by combining a study of its grammar with a reading of some Marathi text. (This model was supplied by the method D. D. Kosambi had used to learn Sanskrit). Mo Ra Valimbe's 'Sugam Marathi Vyakaran' and B. G. Tilak's 'Geeta Rahasya' became my study aids, supplemented with dictionaries and the generous assistance of fellow prisoners, most of them being Marathi. I already knew of Tilak's work and the circumstances of his writing it while imprisoned by the British. This was one reason for making my choice. The other was the better chance a book on the Geeta, and that too written by Tilak, had in getting through prison walls. That was a time when even dictionaries needed the backing of court orders to reach me! My choice turned out to be quite productive in learning the language, with an added, unexpected, bonus. Tilak's systematic exposition and defence of the philosophy and theology underlying the 'Bhagavad Geeta' and the ethics it propounded was of immense help in ordering my own thinking. Most of the essays collected here represent its fruits.

The 'Geeta Rahasya', which includes the Geeta as commented on by Tilak, gave me a better understanding of Brahmanism's philosophy (Advaida), its theology, logic and the bases of its ethics. Some critical ideas I had put down in brief in earlier writings could now be sharpened and expanded. Facets and nuances I had missed could now be dealt with. This permitted a deeper and more exhaustive critique. Current concerns over the direction in which the country is being taken became an added spur.

For any critique to be creative it must go beyond exposure and refutation and become an occasion for self-critical reflection. Elements in one's thinking which identify with those

being criticised must be searched out. Some of the essays therefore also address what I consider to be problems in the practice of Marxist theory. Brahmanism's absolute monism, the employment of 'pure' categories in its elaboration, its ambivalence and subjectivism – all of these have their resonance in the Communist movement. True, the movement already has its criticism of eclecticism, mechanical thought and so on. Nevertheless, an examination of issues concerning the thinking and practice of the movement in India, in the light of a critique of Brahmanism, would be worthwhile. After all, the ideological milieu, and even the grammar and vocabularies of our languages, carry the stamp of Brahmanism.

These essays were written over a period of three years. While writing them I could not access reference materials or do any cross checking, since those were "not allowed". Later, I had the benefit of getting them commented on by comrade Vara Vara Rao and others. Some additions and corrections have been made accordingly, as well as in the light of some new reading I could do after coming out on bail. But factual errors may still be there. Besides, my rendering of quotes from Marathi may not be accurate. Despite such potential infirmities, I am confident that the overall thrust of the arguments these essays advance will still hold up to scrutiny. I hope they will be of help in developing the critique of Brahmanism, encouraging wider debate, and aiding the practical concretisation of immediate concerns.

Before concluding, I must mention the effort and time put in by the editorial team of Navayan Publishers, led by S. Anand, who went through this collection and came up with several proposals to improve it. They certainly would have made for a better reading experience. But that would mean a diversion from other tasks and delay, which was unacceptable. I keenly felt that this collection of essays should be published at the earliest, given the developments taking place in our country. Some of their suggestions have been incorporated, though much had to be left out.

The idea was to bring it out by April on our own, but the

pandemic delayed it. The onerous tasks of pre-publication were overcome through the timely initiative of the Foreign Languages Press, Paris, dedicated to bringing out revolutionary literature, affordable to all, all the while maintaining high standards. They already have an impressive list of titles. A proposal for simultaneous publication, both by FLP and Kanal, was worked out. Apart from the dedicated labour of the FLP Collective, a number of comrades and friends have assisted in typing and proofreading the handwritten manuscripts, as well as in raising funds. I thank them all, with the usual caveat that I alone am responsible for all of its errors.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar remarked that "Brahmanism and capitalism are the two enemies of the workers". This also implied that the struggle against the one should be complemented by that against the other. And, as a corollary, those fighting against one should necessarily engage with the other. Unfortunately, that is not what happened. Much has been written about the reasons underlying this. Much is still being written. But very little is being done in theory as well as in practice to actually bridge the gap. This collection of essays is an attempt in that direction, made from a Marxist viewpoint. Breaking away from the traditional view of recording Brahmanism as a relic of the past, I have preferred to contextualise it within that modernity itself, without ignoring its historical origins and trajectory. Most importantly, the focus of these essays is on critiquing Brahmanism as living ideology, very much present in all spheres and aspects of our society. Given the looming threat of the "Hindu Rashtra" becoming a reality through the agencies of those presently in government, these essays have made their arguments the focal point of the critique. Along with that, this collection also labours to demonstrate why it would be wrong to project them as some sort of an aberration. Rather their exclusivity is shown to be intrinsic to the inclusiveness that has hitherto been celebrated as the mark of our national ethos.

August 2020 Murali (Ajith)

Introduction

Vara Vara Rao

Critiquing Brahminism is a collection of essays written by Comrade K Muralidharan (Ajith) (1953) when he was in Yerawada prison in Pune, Maharashtra for four years and a half from 2015. Though he revealed the fact that he procured an easily available Gita Rahasya by Bal Gangadhar Tilak as well as a simple grammar book to learn Marathi, it also implies a tongue-in-cheek comment and contains a world outlook. This is a Marxist critique against Brahminism. It is also clear that these essays were written from a perspective of dialectical and historical materialism, when he says he followed the method adopted by mathematician and historian DD Kosambi in learning Sanskrit.

In the history that is in the making by people, Naxalbari upsurge is an occasion with proletariat as vanguard. Comrade K. Murali (Ajith) is a people's intellectual evolved out of that movement and has been participating in the ideological struggle for the last four decades. In this collection, Murali has analysed "Brahminism" with historical evidence as well as Marxist perspective. He expects this to be not only a theoretical analysis, but also a practical tool in the hands of working class in its struggle. That's why he prominently quoted Dr B R Ambedkar's advice to workers about the enemies: "Brahminism and Capitalism—these two are the real enemies of workers."

The militant leader of the nationalist movement Bal

Gangadhar Tilak was imprisoned in the same Yerawada prison during the British colonial rule and wrote Gita Rahasya while imprisoned at Mandalay, Myanmar. He introduced himself as "a resident of the holy place Poona and son of twice-born Gangadhar, a Maharashtrian with a surname Tilak, named Bal" . However, he has not mentioned one important fact — he was from Chitpavan Brahmin sect, supposed to be the standard bearer of the Vedic Brahmin beliefs. Actually the secret of the Gita was nothing but the advice of the lord Krishna to Arjuna to prepare the latter for war. Tilak's interpretation was that the Gita propounded the *karma* theory.

That was the route Tilak chose to introduce militancy in the anti-British, anti-colonial national movement. The *varna* ideology proposed by the Gita contained inequality and that was described as hierarchical caste system by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. Thus inequality and violence to establish dharma — these two were accepted by Tilak in the times of colonial modernity.

Gandhi also spent some time in the same Yerawada prison. (The block in which he was lodged is now with a lot of trees and turned to be a place of interest for VIPs. From the point of view of jail officials, it a secret punishment place for rebellious prisoners). Gandhi supported *varna* system in the Bhagavadgita and preached Hindu dharma. Of course, he added nonviolence and removal of untouchability to it.

The national movement opposed colonial rule but not imperialism. Whether it was Tilak or Gandhi, both wanted to have dominion status under the British rule till 1930s. Congress which led the national movement did not seek total independence till 1930s, that too as a response to the pressures of alternative struggles from Ghadar party to Communists and anti-imperialist revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh. Thus, Tilak and Gandhi, with their conservative and extremist positions, embedded in the British colonial rule, wanted "self rule" from their Brahminical perspective and described that as national movement.

They also proposed an illusory Indian nation theory. That Indian nation theory has contributed to the political selfish interests of the British imperialism that merged Indian subcontinent into British India.

It may be accidental that the first batch of nine accused in the Bhima Koregaon-Elgar Parishad case, who treat this subcontinent or the country as a prison house of nationalities and a caste-class society, were also in the same jail during the writing of this book. At least some of them had a chance to read these essays while they were being written and got a chance to participate in the debates about them.

In Bhima Koregaon, Elgar Parishad had mobilised Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim and backward castes, in one word, all non-Brahmin castes. This can also be termed as a mobilisation of castes against Neo-Peshwahi. Afraid of this mobilisation getting organised and leading to resistance, Sanatan Hindu dharma provoked violence by demolishing a Dalit memorial in Vadhu Badrak. That led to a backlash and state-wide agitation. Naturally this appeared to be a Maoist conspiracy to the present-day comprador bureaucratic bourgeois government (state). This is nothing more than Brahminical Fascism that fears its own shadow.

During the Second World War, working class united and led worldwide democratic forces to resist Nazism and Fascism. Now, the fear that accuses the formation of such anti Fascist democratic front itself as a Maoist conspiracy, speaks volumes about the character of this state.

This writer, in these essays, traces out the roots of today's conditions in the novel Anand Math and song Vande Mataram written by the 19th century Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. The novel dissuades the participants of Sanyasi rebellion against the British colonial rulers and asks them to join hands with the British to see Muslims as others and isolate and throw them out. Similarly, Raja Rammohun Roy with Brahmo Samaj and Dayananda Saraswati with Arya Samaj used the

British colonial rule to bring in some reforms in Hindu religion and wanted it to continue.

Savarkar, the guiding force to the present day rulers in every respect, is popularly known as a prisoner of British imperialism and was in Andaman prison as life imprisonment convict. But lesser known fact is that he desired the continuation of the British colonial rule in this country to show Muslims as the others and expel them from the country and asked for amnesty to help the rulers to serve that purpose. He was released for that purpose only. He wanted reforms in Hindu religion to rule a Hindu state without Mulsims. He opposed caste and untouchability and supported Ambedkar in that.

RSS had brought on to the agenda the previous Aryavarta idea as Akhand Bharat. It made Hindutva a synonym to the illusory idea of Indian nation both in social and cultural spheres. The *maya* theory of Adi Shankara who proposed Advaita, is ruling us today as unified market *maya*-ism (fetishism). This is the real face of the Brahminism of imperialist, comprador bureaucratic bourgeois classes. Its main aim is property accumulation. It detests labour and toiling masses, at the same time acquiring and enjoying the fruits of the same labour. It is a culture that divides people as noble souls and untouchables by following social distance, sin of touch and sin of sight. Once upon a time this used to be the character of the system and now it has become the character of the state. However, even as it speaks of Advaita, monism, it actually practices division, dividing people as castes. Practising the monism in Brahminism on one hand and, at the same time, defining unity in diversity (*Ekam sat bahudaa vipram*) implying that it is Brahmins who could visualise the diversity.

In fact Hindu religion itself was born from *varna* and spread like an octopus into thousands of castes and sub-castes. This communalism while dividing human beings at the grassroots level, practises co-option at the ideological level. That's why it could adapt to parliamentary democracy like a fish in water.

"The Brahmanist elites' response to colonial modernity was uneven. In some regions they turned their back on it. In others, mostly regions which became major centres of colonial rule, a prominent section of the local elite adapted to it and strove to profit from it in all spheres of their lives..." says the writer and explains how this idea spread from Calcutta, Bombay and Madras provinces and concludes how they could turn parliamentary democracy into their selfish interest.

"This section identified the opportunity to regain the ruler's seat in future on the strength of a Hindu majority. This would be done by relying on the 'rule of majority' seen in parliamentary democracy. Their efforts to forge a unified Hindu community were largely led by such calculations. The reforms they promoted were meant to serve this cause, apart from allowing their own advance under colonialism. Colonial Orientalism's construct of an ancient Aryan Golden Age and its anointing Advaita as the height of philosophical achievements in South Asia provided a powerful impetus for the growth of this reform stream."

These essays explain how this Brahminism is playing its role as comprador ideology from the British colonial period to the US imperialist period. This analysis of Brahminism and colonial supremacy can be seen in the military invasions of Kashmir and Hyderabad before the making of Indian Constitution. Later, particularly after the victory of Mukti Fauj in Bangaladesh war, both AB Vajpayee and AK Gopalan eulogized Indira Gandhi as Apara Kalika. Whether it was the demolition of predominantly Muslim locality of Turkmen Gate during Emergency under the tutelage of World Bank, or forced vasectomy surgeries on Muslim youth in the Hindi-speaking states, they were the actions of an undeclared Hindu Rajya, implemented by an extra-constitutional force called Sanjay Gandhi.

In 1980s, the assassination of Indira Gandhi as a revenge to the Operation Blue Star against militancy in Punjab led to massacres of Sikhs and for the first time in the country

Parliamentary elections heard the slogan of Hind karega Hindu raj given by none other than Rajiv Gandhi. Ultimately Congress secured record 401 seats. The imperialist globalisation in 1991 came along with the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992. The Ekatmata Rath Yatra went ahead to establish a single unified market.

In Gujarat genocide, it was for the interest of comprador NRIs, even Dalits and Adivasis were provoked and sowed with the venomous seeds of Hindutva. In the context of this genocide only the Hindutva politics reaped electoral gains. The venomous tree became stronger. In 2014 elections, RSS directly entered the arena and with the help of corporate media made Gujarat model into India model. Thus Gujarat genocide and terrible planning of violence has become a development model. This kind of election results in themselves are propagated as democracy.

This ideology can make a Teli-wala prime minister and an Adivasi president. Simultaneously it can also indulge in attacks, destruction and violence on Dalits and Adivasis. It boasts of the ancient rule of Madhava Varma who was supposed to take the call of sacred bell in the street without any discrimination, and at the same time, accuses a hapless Muslim woman and her counsel waiting for twenty years at the gates of justice to seek justice in her husband's assassination.

It can also raise the massacre of Sikhs whenever the issue of Gujarat genocide comes up. It can invent Khalistanis and Maoists in the farmers' agitation. It can always annually raise the issue of Emergency that suspended right to life and at the same time impose undeclared Emergency. Not only that, it can also resurrect the bulldozers of Turkmen Gate from those days and pull down Muslim houses from Delhi and UP to the entire country. It can impose the bulldozing regime, culture and ideology all over. It can isolate and enhance the sense of insecurity among Mulsims in each and every aspect.

After Adi Shankaracharya, it was Vivekananda who

propagated the Vedic religion and particularly Advaita philosophy with equal vigour. In Chicago, US he spoke about equality of all religions but then claimed the qualities of Hindu religion. In a way, this led to Vishwa Hindu idea and propagation of Hindu religion worldwide through Ramakrishna Math, Chinmayananda Mission and Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Of course, they also recognize Nepal as another Hindu nation. But then, despite considering India as a Hindu nation, Vivekananda did not treat Mulsims as outsiders. To quote him, "The Mohammedan conquest of India came as a salvation to the downtrodden, to the poor. That is why one-fifth of our people have become Mohammedans. It was not the sword that did it all. It would be the height of madness to think it was all the work of sword and fire."

Not only that, as a precaution to the present day Hindutva bigots, he also said: "I am thoroughly convinced that no individual or nation can live by holding itself apart from the community of others, and whenever such an attempt has been made under false ideas of greatness, policy or holiness — the result has alsway been disastrous to the secluding one. To my mind, the one great cause of the downfall and the degeneration of India was the building of a wall of custom – whose foundation was hatred of others – round the nation, and the real aim of which in ancient times was to prevent the Hindus from coming in contact with the surrounding Buddhistic nations. Whatever cloak ancient or modern sophistry may try to throw over it, the inevitable result — the vindication of the moral law, that none can hate others without degenerating himself..." (Letters of Swami Vivekananda, p. 150-151)

Yet, without having a single MP or MLA from Muslim community in a country which has the largest Muslim population in the world, the present regime boasts not only to its people, but also to the world that democracy is in our DNA and our DNA carries plurality and diversity. After 2014 elections, BJP's victory and government formation, attacks and massacres on beef sales and inter religious marriages on the pretext of cow slaughter and

Love Jihad began. Lynching has come into vogue. Restrictions on Muslims in terms of food and clothing have come to be enacted.

Except Ghazni and Ghori who attacked and left with booty, all the other rulers like Moghuls who came from outside blended themselves with the ruling system here. That was a feudal, monarchic ruling system. I would not say more than what Irfan Habib spoke about Mughal administration. But just showing them, 20 crore Muslims here are treated as outsiders. In reality, most of them were from Dalits and service castes like washermen, barbers, potters, ironsmiths and carpenters, victims of Brahminical religious inequality, untouchability, violence and cruelty. However, it should be remembered that this attack is not going to stop at Mulsims. RSS, which is going to celebrate its centenary shortly, works from Nagpur, where Muslim minorities are not many, and its ideal is Savarkar and pioneers are Hegdewar and Golvalkar.

Anti-CAA struggle at all India level turned the whole country into Shaheenbagh. Social distance, masks, fear of touch proposed by modern medical practices came handy for the modern Brahminical Hindu Fascism. Ringing bells at homes, lighting candles and lock downs could not contain the deaths and migration. Brahminical Hindu Fascism has demolished the democratic protest against the comments of the BJP spokesperson on the Prophet as well as the aspirations of Muslims who participated in all these democratic movements. It has also demolished their homes. The mask of independence of judiciary fell off with the Ayodhya judgment and reached its nadir with the approval given to the genocide in Jakia Jafri case. The balance of the court brought those who seek justice into the dock and imprisoned human rights defenders and independent media organizations. The fourth pillar, media, has already become a part of this ideology since 2014 elections.

This volume contains an interesting essay, "Of Bharatheeyatha and Malayalitham". It begins with Vallathol Narayana Menon's verse, 'One must be roused up on hearing of Bharatham.

One's heart must swell up with pride on hearing Keralam.' Though it is not equivalent to the idea of nationality that developed with capitalism in Europe, here there was an understanding that this country is an amalgam of different nationalities during the British rule and that's why the Constitution had to include the ideal of a strong union and federal states.

The nationality consciousness that erupted with the division of Bengal is mentioned in this essay. Similarly, Punjab and Maharashtra from that time are also mentioned. In British India, the idea of separateness of Andhras in Madras presidency from 1920s and unity of Telugu nationality under two different rules, British India and Nizam's Hyderabad gained currency with strengthening of Communist Party and finally formation of Visalandhra had become a form of struggle. Even today Modi talks of Gujarat Asmita. Even as the nationality concept is reduced to linguistic states for the sake of Indian (Hindu) nationality, the nationality concept existing in North East states and Kashmir is something anathema to the Sanghis.

As suggested in these essays, the resistance of a broad confluence of all oppressed sections like Adivasis, Dalits, Muslims and democratic forces and individuals under the leadership of the proletariat alone would be able to pull down Fascism. An appropriate model for this anti-Fascist United Front would be a similar attempt from the Spanish Civil War to the victory achieved in the Second World War under the leadership of the proletariat.

Shaheenbagh, farmers' agitation against the three laws, and more radically the ongoing Silger struggle under the leadership of Adivasis for the last one year, demonstrate an optimistic ideal practice before us.

September 2022

A Brief Introduction to Brahmanism

The ideas of a ruling class become the ruling ideas of that society. This observation made by Marx offers us a broad template to contextualise the dominant ideology of any social formation. Marxism demonstrates how this ideology is instrumental in the establishment, deployment and sustenance of state power. Antonio Gramsci expanded on the theme through his concept of hegemony. Hegemony is the domination established by a ruling class in the ideological sphere through shaping a consensus, unconsciously internalised by the ruled. The concept of dominant ideology has been further refined and added to by many others. The means of its reproduction, mechanisms through which it influences and shapes the ideological world of the masses and the various institutions of the society that partake in this have been the subject of much study. Through all of this, Marx's guidance relating the dominant ideology to specific interests of the dominant class remains essential. It grasps the crux of the matter.

The dominant ruling class changes with radical changes in the social system. Accordingly, the ruling ideology too undergoes change. Old values are condemned. New ones take their place. For example, loyalty to the king was a cornerstone of feudal ideology. It is anathema to the ethos of capitalism. However, along with such abrupt reversals, certain beliefs, values, and cultural traits specific to a region or country are carried on. More often than not they relate to the dominant religion, particularised by features unique to that country or region.

Similar to other spheres of ideology, the dominant religion too undergoes transformation, in keeping with new ruling classes'

interests. Continuity is allowed through such refashioning. When the new ruling class follows a different religion, its dynamics will be different. Despite that, where the deposed order represented a developed civilisation, the continuity of the old would persist, no matter how different its elaborations would now be. These religio-cultural beliefs, values and traits reside at the core of the ruling class ideology. This precisely is the status of Brahmanism in India. It lies at the very centre of the ideological make up, the hegemony of the comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie and the feudal lords. It is instrumental in the consensus shaped up and deployed by these classes to legitimise their rule. And thus it serves imperialism.

Brahmanism is an ensemble of philosophical, theological, ethical, cultural, social and economic views and related values. Though closely related to each other, it is still possible and necessary to differentiate Hinduism from Brahmanism. Hinduism, as such, is a term which, over the past few centuries, has come to stand in as a common appellation for a number of belief systems. This was made possible by some features and core beliefs they share. But this has not eliminated their distinctiveness. Among them, a greater or lesser presence of Brahmanism stands out. Some even have their origins in fierce anti-Brahmanism. This therefore allows for the possibility of differentiating Brahmanism from Hinduism.

Some sections of the ruling classes and their ideologues have described Hinduism as a common 'way of life'. It stands contradicted by cultural diversities prominently and widely seen among Hindus themselves. Let alone 'way of life', even the 'ways of worship' of Hindu castes living in the same cultural region are quite varied. Over the past few decades, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its cohorts have made conscious, concerted, moves to steam roll these varying belief systems into their brand of a uniform, explicitly Brahmanist, North Indian version of Vaishnavite Hinduism. Though some headway has already been made by them, contrary streams are still holding

out. And that makes it all the more necessary to differentiate between Brahmanism and Hinduism.

Brahmanism cannot be reduced to something solely related to Brahmins, even though they have been instrumental in its development and sustenance. In fact, the Vedic period itself records sages from the Brahmin *varna*, who propounded views diametrically opposed to the key precepts of Brahmanism. Besides, members of other *varnas*, the Kshatriya Janaka for example, have contributed to or refined Brahmanism. In the middle ages and modern period, people from castes classified as Shudras have played a similar role. Thus, the Brahmanism that is articulated today is a product of the *savarnas* as a whole. They form its social base. Moreover, as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has pointed out, Brahmanism has influenced all classes and castes. Here it must be added that it has also, all along, penetrated all religions in South Asia, to a greater or lesser degree.

The ancient *varna* system and the existing caste system were given form to and sustained by Brahmanism as a division of labour and division of labourers. It propounded '*karma*' i.e. pre-ordained, *varna*/caste bound duty as an inescapable universal law and gave it a sacred stamp. It thus sanctioned the inhuman exploitation and oppression of those literally excluded from community life as Shudras and as Dalits. They were (and the Dalits still are) the main, direct producers. But they had to (have to) live in extreme drudgery and deprivation, subject to the worst form of social abuse. In some parts of the sub-continent, Dalits were traded or rented out as chattel as recently as the late 19th century. They were denied rights to the land, not even as tenants.

During the colonial period and later, some of these obnoxious features were eliminated or mitigated. But the caste system with its specific form of oppression and exclusion continues to exist; it permeates all spheres of society. Brahmanism is contemptuous of manual labour and extols mental labour. It is thus instrumental in reproducing and maintaining the division between mental and

manual labour, a prominent feature of all exploitative societies.

Brahmanism disparages women as polluters and demeans them as agency-less servitors. Thus it promotes patriarchy. It commended such hateful practices like Sati, child marriage and forced seclusion of widows. Though women scholars were occasionally mentioned in Upanishadic texts, later texts like the 'Manusmriti' explicitly denied all freedom to women. They were placed in the same category as Shudras. This retrogressive attitude lingers on in present day biases against educating women and in female foeticide, to give some examples.

Brahmanism seeks and retains domination through assimilation and accommodation. This is its method of proselytisation. It allows space for some of the beliefs, deities customs etc. of an assimilated people. Simultaneously, it also modifies them. They are then integrated at lesser levels in its own theology, pantheon and ethics. The whole process allows Brahmanism to appear as quite tolerant, even while it firmly consolidates its hegemony. At its core, Brahmanism nurtures racism, born of its concept of the *Aryavarta* and its people as exalted.[1]This generates an arrogant attitude of despising ethnic minorities like Adivasi people, those with dark skin colour and those from different racial stocks like the various people

1 "Aryavarta, that is the land of the well bred, the land between the Ganga and Jamuna, where the black antelope roams without hindrance, that land where sacred deeds serving dharma take place." - translated from Marathi.[Vashishta Dharma Sutra (1.12, 1.13), Maharashtra Times, 7-10-2016.] Patrick Olivelle's rendering is as follows: "The region east of where the Sarasvati disappears, west of Kalaka forest, north of Pariyatra mountains, and south of the Himalayas is the land of the Aryas; or else, north of the Vindhya mountains. The Laws and practices of that region should be recognized as authoritative everywhere, but not others found in regions with Laws contrary to those. According to some, the land of the Aryas is the region between the Ganges and Yamuna. According to others, Vedic splendour extends as far as the black antelope roams east of the boundary river and west of where the sun rises. What men who have a deep knowledge of the three Vedas and are learned in the Law declare to be the pure and purifying Law, that, undoubtedly, is the Law". (Dharmasutras, OUP, 1999 p. 248-249)

of the North Eastern regions of India. All of Brahmanism's accommodation and assimilation only serve to reproduce and consolidate this reactionary exclusivist core.

According to Brahmanism, every individual is bound by pre-ordained caste (*varna*) duty, i.e. *karma*. Ultimate liberation is possible only by sticking to it without fail. The *karma* theory is directly related to Brahmanism's anthropocentrism. *Moksha*, liberation of the soul, depends on the elimination of *karma*. Evidently, humans are the sole species capable of this because only they have consciousness. The *atma* (soul) can communicate through it and bring about realisation of the unity of *atma* and *paramatma* (the Absolute). Hence human birth is declared by this theory as something exalted.[2] The fatalist concept of *karma* is a key component of the hegemonic consensus Brahmanism helps to shape up.

Advaida (non-dual thought), its core philosophy, is claimed to have enjoyed supremacy in South Asian philosophy. The roots of this philosophy go back all the way till the Vedic Period. Yet, it had in fact, occupied the prime position only for brief spells. Its resurrection and anointment as the foremost achievement of South Asian philosophical thought and the world outlook of Hinduism was actually a product of colonial Orientalism. Progress from perceptions of multiple phenomena to conceptualisation of the unity among them was an important accomplishment of the monism seen in Advaida. But it was absolutist. Together with its idealism that declared objective reality and its diversity as unreal, as '*maya*', Advaida's absolute monism created a dead end in the Vedanta stream of South Asian philosophy. This was finally overcome by rupturing from absolute monism and dislodging Advaita from its prime position. But it continued providing the philosophical basis for Brahmanism's deviousness. These are

2 "In the carrying out of the process of creation which goes on according to the will of the Supreme, a special role has been given to humans, and the Supreme has brought them into being for it to be carried out by them"; 'Geeta Rahasya', Bal Gangadhar Tilak, 26th Marathi edition, Pune, 2015, page 265.

seen in its precepts like, *'unity in diversity'* and the *'truth is one, (though) sages call it differently'*. Apparently there is acceptance of diversity and different views. Beneath it lies Brahmanism's monopoly claim on truth and insistence that diversities are mere manifestations of this truth.

This account of Brahmanism is by no means exhaustive or comprehensive. It only deals with some of its prominent features. All said, what stands out is the reactionary nature of Brahmanism in all its essential features and their elaborations. For centuries together, over different social systems, under diverse regimes and through various religious dispensations, Brahmanism has served as the ideological lynchpin of reaction in South Asia.

Brahmanism was the ruling ideology of the Shudra-holding mode of production, and then, of various caste-feudal societies that took shape in South Asia. The division of labour of the *varna* system had some amount of flexibility. But under caste-feudalism it became very rigid. That, however, did not totally exclude elevation or demotion in social status of specific castes. Improvement in economic prospects, pressure exerted by anti-Brahmanic struggles, rise and fall in the fortunes of royal dynasties and various other factors allowed for this internal dynamism within the rigidity of the caste system. Most notably, Brahmanism retained its hegemony through all of this.

The spread of Brahmanism and its caste system hastened, and in a certain sense, eased the incorporation of various tribal people into caste-feudal societies. Initially this promoted the growth of productive forces. Advances were made in the sciences, medicine, literature and arts. A great deal of scattered knowledge in diverse fields and regions was collected, classified and synthesised into comprehensive theories. Previous advances made in this direction under Buddha and Jaina domination were taken over. In all of this the class and caste interests of the ruling class laid down their stamp. This was seen in the particular syntheses made, guided by Brahmanism. Denial of the local,

empirical, sources of knowledge was quite prominent in the worked out theories. Instead, all knowledge, whether it be in the sciences or arts, was attributed to the blessing of one or the other god from the Brahaminist pantheon.

Such appropriation of peoples' knowledge was not unique Brahmanism. But it went well beyond all other ruling class ideologies known to world history in denying knowledge to the oppressed, including women. The Brahmanist legal-moral code of caste-feudalism given in the 'Manusmriti' calls for pouring molten lead in the ears of a Shudra who commits the 'offence' of listening to the recital of the Vedas. This reactionary stance led to an unbridgeable gap between manual and mental labour. It caused great harm to the further advance of science and technology. The empirical sources of knowledge, restricted to the labouring castes, were shut off. This shriveled up theory, monopolised as it was by the Brahmins and other elites. Practice, quite naturally, floundered in repetitious ruts, bereft of new insights from theory.

The caste system, with its graded inequality and division of labour, greatly facilitated control over the labouring masses. Hence, irrespective of religious orientation, whether Islamic, Buddhist, Sikh or Christian, every ruling class took care to retain it. The traditional Kshatriya kings were displaced during Turk, Moghul, Afghan and Sikh reigns. Yet they, and the Brahmin castes, continued to be part of the ruling class as a whole. The caste system continued with some modifications.

Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Christianity explicitly exclude any form of social segregation like caste. Yet caste has become an inseparable part of these religious communities in South Asia. Brahmanism retained an influential role in the ruling ideology of every kingdom, no matter what the religious belief of the ruler. Thus, its characteristic of being at the core of everything reactionary in South Asia was maintained.

During the Middle Ages, some castes considered as Shudras

succeeded in elevating their social status and economic position. This laid the foundation for the later forging of *savarna* caste blocs. Under colonial domination they received a major boost. This became the basis for conceiving a single Hindu community spanning the whole sub-continent. However, this was not premised on the elimination of caste, though it did contain a measure of reforms. These reforms were brought about by two factors. One of them was the challenge posed by Christian (Victorian) values promoted by colonialism. The other was the pressure exerted by Shudra castes and the *avarna* castes. The former were keen to ease their way for further advances within the emerging *savarna* blocs. The latter sought to overturn the caste system itself. Both of them challenged Brahmanist values and practices to a greater or lesser degree. Yet, the reforms proposed and debated as part of the formation of a unified Hindu community were essentially shaped and led by Brahmanism itself.

The Brahmanist elites' response to colonial modernity was uneven. In some regions they turned their back on it. In others, mostly regions which became major centres of colonial rule, a prominent section of the local elite adapted to it and strove to profit from it in all spheres of their lives. This section identified the opportunity to regain the ruler's seat in future on the strength of a Hindu majority. This would be done by relying on the 'rule of majority' seen in parliamentary democracy. Their efforts to forge a unified Hindu community were largely led by such calculations. The reforms they promoted were meant to serve this cause, apart from allowing their own advance under colonialism. Colonial Orientalism's construct of an ancient Aryan Golden Age and its anointing Advaida as the height of philosophical achievements in South Asia provided a powerful impetus for the growth of this reform stream. Raja Rammohan Roy was one of its main initiators. Swami Dayanand Saraswati was an important theological proponent. At a much later stage, M. K. Gandhi worked to bring in intermediary and Dalit castes into this stream by adding suitable political and social dimensions.

Colonialism led to the emergence of new classes like the comprador traders and urban middle classes. An elite intelligentsia greatly influenced by Western mores grew up. All of these classes and strata were overwhelmingly *savarna*, with a preponderance of Brahmins. While aping their colonial masters in public life they retained most of Brahmanism's casteist, patriarchal, feudal values and practices in the private sphere. And that was equally true of those in favour of reforms.

From its initial period itself colonialism started transforming caste-feudalism. Capitalist relations of trade and production were steadily promoted. Imperialism with its wider investment of finance capital, gave a big boost to this process. Unlike the capitalism that emerged and grew in Western Europe by fundamentally eliminating feudalism, the one spawned by imperialism in the colonies was intertwined with feudalism. It served both imperialism and feudalism. Mao Zedong termed it 'bureaucrat capitalism', represented by the comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie. Elements of this class took form in British India and the numerous petty kingdoms of the sub-continent. Over the period of colonial rule they began to coalesce into a single class. Their social base was *savarna*, mainly Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya. Jaina, Christian and Muslim *savarna* too were part of it. Brahmanism was an essential part of the ideological outlook of this new bourgeois class. They shared it with the feudal classes with whom they retained many ties, social and as well as economic.

Though sharing Brahmanism in common, these local elite classes had major differences among themselves on how it was to be adopted and articulated under modern conditions. Initially this was to a great extent centred on colonial reform measures, a part of its so-called civilising mission. By this time the Shudra castes had made significant advance. They were keen on more reforms that would loosen up caste structures sufficiently enough to further enable their growth. Apart from this, from late 19th-early 20th century onwards, intermediate castes and Dalit castes

had entered the path of struggle against the caste order. They had started to improve their economic status and were pushing against casteist barriers. All of these factors made the matter of reforming Brahmanism all the more crucial and complex. Under these circumstances, a division between liberal and diehard wings of the *savarnas* emerged and gradually became rigid.

The diehards, represented by B. G. Tilak and colleagues, were vehemently opposed to colonial reforms. To them it was a hidden assault on the basic tenets of Brahmanism. That did not mean that they were insisting on sticking to the Brahmanism of the bygone caste-feudal period. While they opposed reforms promoted by colonialism, such as women's education and prevention of child marriages for example, theirs' was not an outright rejection. Rather, their stance was that all of these were originally part of ancient Brahmanist social more, but were later corrupted. Hence, instead of basing reforms on a critique of Brahmanist thought and practices, Brahmanism itself should guide the change demanded by modern conditions.

Their stance was also largely informed by their anti-colonialism (not anti-imperialism).[3] They observed that much of the thinking underlying the reforms and the accompanying critique of existing practices were coming from the standpoint of the coloniser. This was certainly true. However, their opposition was by no means consistent. Along with their pro-reform opponents, they too shared in applauding what was being described as the 'beneficial outcomes' of colonial rule. The very standards and proofs they relied on to declare the superiority of

3 Anti-colonialism refers to the opposition shown by a growing section of the local elite to direct British rule. Starting from seeking position in the colonial government, they went on demand 'dominion status'. Tilak's often quoted declaration, 'Swaraj is my birth right', actually referred to 'Home Rule', i.e. 'dominion status'. 'Swaraj' as total independence was formally adopted by the Indian National Congress much later. This came through the pressure from the revolutionary nationalist movement and growing communist and Left movements. Even then, 'independence' as framed by the Congress did not mean breaking off from imperialism. Hence the differentiation, 'anti-colonialism' and 'anti-imperialism'.

pristine Brahmanism were those offered by Western thought and conditioned by colonial modernity. In essence, they were trying to retain explicit, diehard Brahmanist views and its practices as much as possible under the cover of a fake national pride.

The opposite stream initially addressed caste practices and rituals that hindered the advance of *savarnas* under colonial modernity. A major change took place with the rise of Gandhi to the leadership of the Congress. He strove to evolve and promote a moderate form of Brahmanism, suited to the new situation. The stress was on its accommodative character. It was particularly directed at retaining the Dalits and intermediary castes under the hegemony of Brahmanism. These castes had started organising independently and articulating their demands in opposition to the *savarna* bloc. The possibility of their conversion to other religions was also looming up. In the given conditions, diehard, orthodox Brahmanism advocated by Tilak and companions was proving counter-productive. Conditions were thus suited for the acceptance and ascendancy of the Gandhian variation among the *savarna* elite and middle class.

The Gandhian refashioning of the hegemonic consensus being evolved had to take into consideration the new challenges. It had to offset and neutralise them. Together with this, the religious communal divide also had to be addressed. This was a combined product of colonial 'divide and rule' policies and the sectarian interests of the Hindu and Muslim elites. Mobilisation of peasants, workers and students on class lines, breaking away from and weakening traditional ties of caste and religion, the growing influence of communism and progressive thought in general and the strengthening of a radical anti-imperialist current of struggle were additional developments. In their totality, these factors were threatening to upset the hegemonic consensus being forged. The Gandhian shaping of hegemony sought to overcome these threats by accommodating, in part, the concerns underlying them. It represented an application in modern conditions of the age-old Brahmanist method of domination through assimilative

accommodation.

This was also a process of forging a common ideological frame unifying the various sections of comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie and feudal lords, the 'ruling classes in waiting'. Imagining an Indian nation existing from antiquity and positing the task of regaining its assumed world status and glory through anti-colonial struggle were prominent aspects of the political dimension of the new consensus being firmed up. Elements of modern bourgeois thought such as nationalism, and later, economic development, were thus incorporated within an essentially Brahmanist hegemony. Gandhi was instrumental in this endeavour, making its modern political dimension explicit, evenwhile weaving it into a Brahmanic fabric with liberal deployment of Hindu symbols. Many other too contributed, from the littérateur Rabindranath Tagore to the modernist Jawaharlal Nehru. Even if their views were often at variance in specific instances, the Brahmanist vision of *'unity in diversity'*, now concretised in the imagining of an Indian nation, was a common theme.

Under colonialism, diverse nationalities and far flung regions were unified under centralised rule, spanning the whole subcontinent. Tutoring of their local elites in the coloniser's language and values promoted a new type of inter-communication. This was the material basis that allowed the imagining of an Indian nation. Brahmanism's dream of a *'Bharath'* covering the whole subcontinent could thus acquire a new life, now as a single country. Simultaneously, through providing a sense of ancient origins, Brahmanism made it possible to conceive what was actually an outcome of colonial rule as the resurgence of a held back past. It thus contributed in a massive way to the concealment of the foreign, dependent, foundations of the future rulers' concept of Indian 'nationhood', in the inverted reality conveyed through the false consciousness of Indian nationalism. This was a glaring instance of Brahmanism's service to imperialism. At present too, it continues to do this.

Following the transfer of power in 1947, India, formed through the integration of petty-kingdoms with post-partition British India, became formally independent. Under neocolonial conditions of indirect imperialist control and exploitation, the semblance of independence was of much importance both for the new ruling classes as well as imperialism. Imperialist designed and funded projects and technology were absorbed. Deeper penetration of foreign finance capital, which heightened dependence, was heralded as development. Thus, the false consciousness of independence and development became a crucial part of the new hegemonic consensus. It has been employed to legitimise the ruling classes' exploitative reign, their aggressive Indian expansionism externally, and national, ethnic oppression internally. In all of these functions, Brahmanism's claim of an Akhand Bharat has been an underlying theme. The myth of *ahimsa* (non-violence) as a long standing characteristic of a purported Indian civilisation was promoted to conceal this ugly truth.

Even a cursory glance through Brahminic texts will show that the civilisations guided by it were anything but non-violent. Violence, for the seizure, control and retention of state power was elaborated on in Brahmanism's sacred as well as temporal texts. Violence, to put down the Shudra or Adivasi who dared to breach Brahmanism's prohibitions was extolled. Violence, to safeguard patriarchy, even maiming women 'to put them in their place', all of this was accepted as legitimate acts of rule.[4] *Ahimsa*, was actually the ideological expression of Buddhist/ Jainist opposition to Brahmanism's ancient practice of large

4 Kautilya's 'Arthashastra', the Brahmanist text on statecraft, enumerates the kith and kin to be eliminated inorder to safeguard a newly established royal power. Rama, extolled as the 'model king', beheaded Shambuka the Shudra for daring to do 'tapas' to gain knowledge. The 'Mahabharata' tell us of the Adivasi Ekalavya, forced to cut off his thumb for the 'crime' of learning and excelling in archery. A ninth century king of a region (presently in Keralam) issued an edict demanding the slicing off of the breasts of any woman who failed to bare them before a male of a superior caste—these are some examples of Brahmanism's violent nature.

scale animal sacrifice. Incorporated by Gandhi as a posture of the new hegemonic consensus, it became a tool to cover up for Brahmanism's inherently violent character.

The hegemonic construct of a moderate, inclusive Brahmanism did not go uncontested. Organised in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Hindu Mahasabha and like-minded organisations, – mostly around the communal issue – efforts were made to elaborate an aggressive stance.[5] Most of this centred on the positioning of Brahmanism in Indian nationalism in the new hegemonic consensus. However, in the period leading up to the transfer of power and for several decades since, this stream did not gain traction among the elite. It had to remain as an aberrant, inconsequential trend. But it was never completely excluded. On the contrary, it had always been allowed space, albeit limited. The journey of this aggressive Brahmanist stance from the margins to become dominant in the hegemonic consensus of the Indian ruling classes has been the most significant development in the Indian political scene during the past few decades.

In order to gain a proper understanding of this shift we must first of all reject a simplistic view widely seen in liberal, progressive circles. It reduces the matter to mere power hungry machinations of the RSS. Far beyond manipulation of any one section, this shift is rooted in the interests of the ruling classes as a whole. It stems from the legitimacy crisis they face. The hegemonic consensus evolved under Gandhi and further supplemented by Nehru,

5 Among the leaders of this stream VD Savarkar stood out with his singular positions. He was a prominent leader of the Hindu Mahasabha and fully shared its communal stance vis a vis Muslims and other religious minorities. But, within this, he was distinguished by his efforts to advance a 'rational' Brahmanism. He opposed untouchability and insisted on ending caste segregation in order to build a single united Hindu community. With this orientation, he supported Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's struggle against the caste system. Savarkar rejected the majority view of the Hinduvadis and Congress stalwarts like Gandhi on eating beef. In his view, such restrictions only helped to physically weaken the Hindus and was therefore unsuited to contemporary challenges, including that of protecting Hindus, using force where called for.

faced severe strain from the 1960s onwards. Claims of developing an independent Indian nation were increasingly exposed by visible signs of imperialist dependency. The legitimacy of the ruling classes' state was challenged by struggles of the masses and national movements. The Naxalbari armed peasant rebellion shook up the whole country.

Attempting to repair and restore the hegemonic consensus, the Congress led by Indira Gandhi, first tried a mix of populism and fascist rule. When that failed, an ideological remoulding raising the need to revise hitherto sanctioned views on caste based reservation, secularism and other elements of the old consensus was promoted. The state-controlled, public sector-led, economic model began to be dismantled. The semblance of self-reliance made way for deeper penetration of TNCs. All of this would take a leap with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the wholesale promotion of the globalisation agenda in the 1990s. The recasting of the hegemonic consensus was accompanied by a conscious attempt to bind the s*avarna* Hindu castes into an all-India compact as a core social base of the state. Over the years, the undertones of the new hegemonic consensus being shaped up became more and more apparent as an explicit Brahmanism, packaged as resurgent Hinduism. This is endorsed and promoted by all sections of the ruling classes, by their representatives across the whole political spectrum. They differ among themselves on the limits of its aggressiveness and the modes of its articulation. The extent to which the social basis of Brahmanism should be widened beyond the *savarna* bloc is also contested. There is an added tug born of the RSS's compulsions.

To put its stamp on the refashioning of the hegemonic consensus, the RSS must recast it altogether by displacing and marginalising the dominant Gandhi-Nehru motif. This is being done through an exercise in de-hyphenation. While Gandhi is given a make over projecting his 'localness', Nehru is vehemently excluded, emphasising his 'Westerness'.The Congress has all along staked monopoly claim on representing the Indian nation,

since it was the main political stream in the anti-colonial struggle. This was a major aspect of the old consensus. The Gandhi-Nehru legacy is firmly enmeshed with it. So long as that legacy retains some credibility, the formal enthroning of aggressive Brahmanism at the core of the new hegemonic consensus cannot be realised with full force. Crude substitution of the RSS's aggressive stance in place of the benign Gandhi-Nehru motif, while allowing the latter's claim to supremacy in anti-colonial pedigree to remain, is not feasible. The historical record of Sangh Parivar and its founder leaders simply won't allow it. They kept away from the anti-British struggle. The broader Hindutva forces too fared no better.

Given this burden of its past, the RSS has been pursuing a multi-pronged strategy aimed at manufacturing its own 'nationalist' discourse. This ranges from chauvinism centred on flaunting Brahmanic symbols and slogans, to the appropriation of icons of past struggles, social as well as national. The RSS is energetically trying to offset the Congress's monopoly claim on being the leader of the anti-British struggle. With this in mind it publicises all the other streams, hitherto ignored or sidelined in the official narrative. In all of this, repositioning or rereading them as votaries of Hinduvad, even if as mild ones, is sought to be realised.

Liberal intellectuals, the Congress and the parliamentary Left, try to resist this by summoning the anti-communal stance of those whom the RSS seeks to appropriate. But that will make hardly a dent. Most of those leaders were from the elite. They retained much of their Brahmanist upbringing. This was expressed in their thought and practice. A number of militant, non-Congress, anti-British movements deployed Hindu symbols and motifs as markers of their nationalism. As for icons of the anti-Brahmanist stream, the social reformers, a simple appeal to their teachings will not be of help today, in opposing the RSS co-option game plan. An elite has emerged within the oppressed castes that had formed the social base of those movements.

They are increasingly Brahmanised in direct proportion to the growth of their exploitative interests. They, on their own, have been 'sanitising' their struggling pasts and its leaders to suit them to their current class interests and supposedly improved social status. Hence, there is much that is complementary between the dynamics governing this elite and the RSS' appropriation strategy. Since these elite still enjoy considerable influence among the oppressed masses, this complementarity has serious implications.

The ruling classes have been able to proceed with refashioning/recasting their hegemonic consensus without facing much ideological challenge. A crucial factor allowing this is the failure of the Left, particularly the communists, to develop a comprehensive, trenchant critique of Brahmanism and fully integrate an assault on the caste system with the class struggle. The parliamentary Left further compounds it by trying to position itself as the true defenders of Gandhi-Nehru legacy. It even competes with the RSS to lay claim on Brahmanism's icons. Though rather late, the radical Left has made some advances in grasping the need to struggle against Brahmanism, in theory and practice. However, it faces many limitations. It is yet to translate its vision into a powerful political and ideological challenge.

The history of the critique and struggle against Brahmanist values, norms and social order goes all the way back to antiquity. Materialist thinkers like the Carvakas ridiculed its idealist philosophy. Buddha and Jaina theologies opposed Vedic Brahmanist rituals and beliefs. However, through a combination of internal degeneration of these religions and outright suppression they were either Brahmanised or crushed. Even a fierce assault, such as that of the Lingayat led by Basavanna in the Middle Ages, was overcame by Brahmanism. It was accommodated as yet another sect, with its own caste divisions. We see this repeated in the case of Sikhism too. In all these instances, the caste order and thus Brahmanism, have repeatedly made a comeback through the transformation in the class character of the leading strata of

those who came together to challenge Brahmanism, leading to their becoming part of the exploitative order.

An additional dynamic too pushed them in this direction. Cultural and religious practices deemed as superior by the caste system were exclusively reserved for the Brahmin castes. The Kshatriya and Vaisya castes were allowed some lax in this matter. But it was totally denied to Shudras and *avarna* castes. They were forced to follow practices and norms declared as lowly and polluting. This gave rise to an intense sense of lack at the psychological level. The push to challenge the caste order was propelled in part by the urge to overcome it, to end the self-abasement it caused. Becoming 'cultured' thus acquired great significance in the process of breaking out of that humiliation. But, in the absence of a total, sustained rupture from Brahmanism at the ideological and material levels, this urge translated into efforts to gain access to previously denied Brahminist spaces, cultural practices and rituals. This inevitability ended up in their getting Brahmanised. Yet, despite such regressions, the penetrating critique on Brahmanism made by these movements remain a valuable legacy. For generations together, they have continued to inspire new upsurges.

The colonial period witnessed a series of attacks on Brahmanism and the caste system at the theoretical and social levels. Among the notable ones were those articulated by Mahatma Phule, Vaikunta Swamy, Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Poykayil Yohannan, EV Ramaswamy Periyar, Sahodaran Ayyappan and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.[6] Vaikunta Swamy (from the southern extreme

6 Given my limited knowledge this list is quite restricted. Some of the names need an introduction for a wider readership. Narayana Guru insisted that all humanity is one caste and only individual differences exist among them. Ayyankali led, what may the first, Dalit public protest in the early decades of the 20th century claiming the right to public passage. He organised a year-long agrarian strike demanding the right to education. Poykayil Yohannan broke away from a Protestant order after realising that Christianity too was caste-ridden. He elaborated a new theology and established a religious order aptly named "God's Assembly for Direct Salvation (*Pratyaksharaksha Daiva Sabha*). Sahodaran Ayyappan, a disciple

of Thiruvithamkoor, presently in Tamil Nadu's Kanyakumari district) explicitly targeted both 'Nisan' and 'Vennisan'. The terms referred to the Kshatriya king of Thiruvithamkoor and his British suzerain. But that was an exception. All the others limited their critique to Brahmanism, leaving out its nexus with colonialism. Ground reality greatly influenced this skewed approach. Colonial rule had opened up avenues for the advance of the oppressed castes. Their articulate elite quite readily saw the colonial power as a benefactor, if not a saviour, and kept it outside the ambit of their struggle. Some among them, Periyar and Ambedkar for instance, did criticise British Rule on some occasions. Even then, they too didn't make the struggle against it integral to the anti-Brahmanist struggle. The need to address the caste question in its concreteness, as a vital component of persisting semi-feudalism, was also missing. That Brahmanism was now becoming part of the ideological make-up of a modern class, the comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie that had emerged under and through colonial rule, was never identified. Therefore, despite the advances made by these anti-Brahmanist leaders and movements, they failed in developing a comprehensive critique of Brahmanism. In a repetition of the past, they are in the process of being converted into hollow figureheads. Some are already well advanced in becoming Brahmanised gods.

Among the anti-Brahmanist critques of the modern period, that of Dr. Ambedkar stands out for its depth and comprhensiveness. Ambedkar exposed the graded morality of the caste system. He pointed out that caste was a division of labour. His declaration that "Brahmanism and Capitalism are the two real enemies of the working class." has great implications with regard to gaining of class consciousness by the proletariat. In our conditions, the process of the proletariat becoming a 'class

of Narayana Guru, went beyond his teaching of *'One Caste, One Religion, One God for humanity'* and put forward a radical, rationalist position *'No Caste, No Religion, No God is needed for humankind'*. All of these stalwarts were from Thiruvithamkoor, presently part of Keralam.

for itself' must necessarily involve a sharp struggle against the caste system.

Dr. Ambedkar welcomed radical practices such as the promotion of inter-caste dining and marriage. Along with that, he also cautioned those who believed that these steps would lead to the end of the caste system. He directed their attention to the need to destroy the whole ideological frame sustaining it. This was the crux of his clarion call to 'dynamite Hinduism' for the annihilation of caste. In as much as this posed the need to make an ideological rupture, it was correct. However, in treating the matter as simply one of Hinduism, Ambedkar severely limited the scope of such rupture. Not just Hinduism, all the religions of South Asia have internalised caste and thus Brahmanism. What is needed is a wholesale attack on Brahmanism; an attack that aims at annihilating it at the ideological, political, social, cultural, psychological and economic levels.

Despite its accommodative methods, Brahmanism is extremely divisive. The more aggressive it gets, the more divisive it is. Hence its plans to forge a seamless Hindu Bloc inevitably get upset. Brahmanism cannot but push the oppressed into struggle. It cannot but aggravate contradictions within itself. Therefore, the prospects of struggle against it, of gaining victory over it, are quite bright; provided proper lessons are learnt from the past.

We have seen that the long history of anti-Brahminist struggles in the subcontinent has been marked by many forceful leaps. It was also noted how, on every occasion, the elevation of the caste (social) status of the strata leading the struggle and their absorption into the exploiting classes has led to the muting of the attack and its ultimate defeat. The lesson that emerges from this is the necessity to carryout the struggle against Brahmanism as an integral part of the struggle to plough over the exploitative social order that sustains it and all the classes representing this order. This, again, would only be the first step. Time and again, Brahmanism has adapted itself to different social systems. Will

the ending of the present exploitative set up eliminate all grounds for another adaptive adjustment of Brahmanism? No, it won't.

So long as classes exist, so long as remnants of the caste system exists, so long as the contradiction between mental and manual labour and similar differences exist, so long as patriarchy exists, Brahmanism will be able to seek out niches to lodge itself. It will then gradually spread out, aiding and preparing grounds for a reactionary restoration, one that will allow it to make a complete comeback. If this is to be prevented, if it is to be completely eliminated, the process of social revolution must be pushed on. The soil which can allow Brahmanism to make a re-entry must be done away. This demands the elimination of all exploitative production relations, of all social structures that have risen up on these relations, and of all the thinking, ideas, generated by those social structures. In the past, there was no social force, no ideology capable of pursuing this task till the very end. Today, there is such a class, the proletariat and its ideology. The future of the struggle against Brahmanism is critically dependent on its creative application to this task.

§

A Critique of Brahmanist Ethics

I have chosen to attempt a critique of Brahmanist ethics taking Bal Gangadhar Tilak's 'Gita Rahasya as foil for several reasons, apart from its being readily available.[7] The most important one among them is his elaboration and commentary on the ethics advanced by the 'Bhagavad Gita', remaining consistently faithful to *Advaida. Advaida* is, at present, the dominant school of idealism confronting materialism in our context. The tradition of South Asian philosophical debate demands that one must engage with the strongest position of one's adversary. Therefore taking on idealist ethics elaborated from the viewpoint of Advaida as '*purvapaksha*' would be most appropriate.

Tilak's scholarly work is a reasoned and passionate plea for '*karmayoga*', the path of action. The whole purpose guiding his work is the ambition to establish *karmayoga* in opposition to '*jnanayoga*' (the path of contemplation) or '*bhaktiyoga*' (the path of worship). This makes it eminently suitable for debating ethics. Ethics is, of course, present in both the contemplative and worship modes of consciousness. Yet, the mode of action surpasses both of them in this regard. In any action, the ethical question of good or bad, right or wrong, is always present, prominently and immediately. Therefore engaging with *karmayoga* is best suited for my purpose. With this as an introduction let me get on.

Tilak has sub-titled his 'Gita Rahasya' in English thus: 'The Hindu Philosophy of Life, Ethics and Religion'. Yet, throughout the work, 'Hindu' is used rather sparingly while referring to religion. 'Sanatan', 'Bhagavad' and 'Narayan' mostly, and on a few occasions 'Brahman' have been used as qualifiers for *dharma*, where this word is used in the sense of a religion. Hinduism was

7 'Gita Rahasya' [GR], Bal Gangadhar Tilak, 26th Marathi Edition, Pune, 2015.

(and is) by no means a monolith. It is a broad range of belief systems with many visible divergences. Brahmanism justified the *varna* (caste) system. There were (and are) other streams that opposed them. This was also true of those who upheld Advaita, claimed to be the core philosophy of Hinduism. There was Narayana Guru who vehemently rejected *varna*/caste divisions. He refused to accord any utility to them. There were also Tilak and Gandhi who justified *varna* and, by implication, caste. All of them were staunchly Advaidi. Given all of this, I am surely justified in treating Tilak's work as an elaboration of Brahmanist ethics, based on his reading of the Gita.

Unflinching adherence to one's *karma* (duty) lies at the core of Tilak's exegesis. He insists that this is the central message of the Gita. In order to establish this he takes up a detailed refutation of other readings of the Gita. These argue that its teaching is '*nivritipar*' (the withdrawal from *karma*) or *bhakti* (worship of god) as the path to '*moksha*' (liberation). *Moksha* is the liberation of the '*atma*' (soul) from *jani-mriti*', the endless cycle of birth and death. Tilak contrasts *karmayoga* to these views. It calls for continuing to do one's *karma* ordained duties, that is duties given by one's *varna*, even after gaining *jnana* (inner realisation). *Jnana* is the gaining of awareness of the unity of one's *atma* with the *parabrahma* (formless, qualityless, eternal absolute). The *parabrahma* lies beyond *maya* (illusion), beyond the illusory sensuous universe. Normally, *karma* binds one to the cycle of *jani-mriti*. Hence it may seem to be an obstacle for gaining *jnana*. Tilak argues that this won't happen if one does *karma* with a *nishkama* (unattached, disinterested) outlook. That is, an attitude of doing *karma* all the while remaining free of desire for, or attachment to, its outcome. The *nishkamakarma* called for by the Gita does not cause binding of the *atma* in *maya*. Thus, it is not a hurdle for attaining *jnana* and ultimate *moksha*. Taking this as his frame of thought, Tilak accuses Adi Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva and other Gita commentators of misinterpreting it in order to project their 'sectarian' views foregrounding *jnana*

marga or *bhakti marga*.

Tilak was a leading member of what was known as the 'political' wing of the Indian National Congress in its pre-Gandhi period. This section insisted on focusing the anti-colonial struggle on gaining the right to self-rule (dominion status). Tilak and his colleagues made strident criticism of the British rule and advocated activism.[8] Additionally, he was a prominent member of the orthodox *savarna* grouping that tried its best to stop social reforms, or, at the least, delay them.

Tilak's advocacy of *karmayoga* was informed by these views. It was marshalled to substantiate them. The Gita Rahasya was thus intended to fulfil a political, ideological role, even while it stayed within the frame of a theological-philosophical treatise.

Tilak's dismissal of Adi Sankara and other interpreters of Gita as a bunch of sectarians is not quite convincing. Its text gives room for all three — *jnana marga*, *bhakti marga* and *karma marga*. However, Tilak is on more firm ground when he points out that the very purpose of the Gita was to overcome Arjuna's doubts, which were inhibiting action. It urged him to make war, not sit in contemplation or pious worship.

The Mahabharath portrays the Pandavas as reluctant to make war. They were forced on to it by the adamant refusal of the Kauravas to accede to their demand for a share of territory. In this sense they were justified in making war. But this would entail the annihilation of their own kith and kin, their revered teachers. This was the ethical dilemma faced by Arjuna. The Gita Rahasya expounds *karmayoga* by elaborating on the ethics underlying Krishna's exhortations to get Arjuna join battle. It thus seeks to answer the most fundamental question of ethics — why should or should not someone do something? Tilak's defence of *karmayoga* is thus, simultaneously, an exposition of Brahmanism's 'ethics of action'. He however,

8 Though Tilak was not directly involved in armed activities his views were quite influential among those carrying them out. VD Savarkar is said to have reached a copy of 'Bomb Making', a manual compiled him, to Tilak.

does not rest satisfied with a mere account of the ethics given by the Gita. The reader is taken on a rapid survey of alternative views. Through comparison, the supremacy of Brahmanist ethics is sought to be established.

The Gita Rahasya gives a three-way categorisation — the positivist or materialist, the vitalist and the spiritual (metaphysical). Drawing on a number of sources, Tilak argues that, among them, the first cannot provide a consistent, sound basis for ethics. The second is shown to be a specific variation of the third, the spiritual. And within this, the claim is made that Advaida, the philosophical core of Brahmanism, is the only one that can provide a correct, consistent and comprehensive foundation for ethics.

The account of various schools of materialism given in the Gita Rahasya is rather superficial. At times it even descends to cheap vulgarisation. Keeping this aside let us examine the core of its accusations. Materialism, it is said, fails to provide consistent reasoning for ethics since its vision remains at the level of the visible, sensed, world of objects. Tilak agrees that some materialist schools do insist that, in any action, mental satisfaction too must be considered along with material satisfaction. But he then asserts that by going beyond sensuous reality they thereby violate their own materialist premises.[9] Besides, they cannot have solid criteria to determine what would fulfil their quest for mental satisfaction. Satisfaction will always be transient and incomplete.[10]

In contrast to this, Tilak argues, the spiritual view goes beyond the sensuous world. It is guided by the realisation, acceptance, of a Supreme Being or ultimate truth, which can be appealed to. One's action can be justified in reference to it. The dos and don'ts prescribed by all religions are set by this. Tilak accepts that all religions teach love and compassion to one's fellow human beings. However, he argues, non-Vedic religions are unable to provide a coherent reasoning to substantiate this

9 GR, p. 73.
10 Ibid, p 63.

teaching. Contrarily, Advaida's concepts of *parabrahma* and *atma*, its teachings on their oneness and the all-pervasive presence of *parabrahma* within everything, ensures this. Since all are part of *parabrahma*, a solid basis is given by Advaida to see oneself in the others and behave with them as one would with oneself. Advaida therefore gives a consistent, correct and comprehensive foundation to base ethics on. Such, in short, is Tilak's claim about the supremacy of Brahmanist ethics.

The unity of the *atma* and *nirguna parabrahma* is one of the pillars of Gita's ethics of action. Krishna employs it to overcome Arjuna's ethical dilemma — why make war and bear the sin of fratricide? He teaches Arjuna that the *atma* is never born, nor does it die. Even after a person is killed, the *atma* remains. It is indestructible, imperishable, uncreatable and eternal. He who gains this knowledge can neither be killed nor kill. Just as one takes off soiled clothes and wears fresh ones, the *atma* sheds the old body and joins with a new one. Therefore, there is no point in being saddened by what happens to any material body.[11]

Apparently, this settles the matter. There is nothing ethically wrong in Arjuna waging war if he actually does not kill anyone. But is this logic really sound? Can't it be used, equally consistently, to argue the opposite, i.e. turning away from the battle? If no one can be 'really killed' then what is the point in waging war? There is also the danger of this thesis of 'not killing, though killing' being employed to justify plain murder. Tilak admits as much and tries to get out of this predicament through a lengthy note.[12] His defence, however, is rather lame. Tilak states that to kill one's enemy in battle as part of one's *varna* duty is justified. But, since the human body is the means to achieve *moksha*, wilfully destroying it through suicide or murder would be a grievous sin. This logic gives rise to a question; if the *atma* can never be destroyed, just how does it become a sin? Since it passes from one body to another, what difference would it make if death is caused

11 Ibid, pp 378-80. Slokas 2.19 to 2.30 of the Bhagavad Gita (BG).
12 Ibid, pp 380-81.

by murder, instead of battle injuries? Rather, to kill someone could well be considered as a means of 'progressing' the victim's *atma* towards *moksha*.[13]

Avoiding such sticky questions, Tilka takes up the direct one. If Arjuna will not really kill anyone, why should he take the trouble to engage in bloody war? Morover, having gained *jnana* about the oneness of *atma* and *parabrahma*, isn't avoiding war the more correct thing to do? Tilak accepts that "some other powerful reasoning" has to be advanced to answer this. In his opinion, this is in fact the crux of the ethics advanced by the Gita.

Unsurprisingly enough, given the Brahmanist thinking it is part of and serves, the answer, the "other powerful reason", is nothing other than an appeal to *chathurvarna*, the graded division of society into four *varnas*. Krishna reminds Arjuna that there can be nothing more honourable for a Kshatriya than waging war in line with his *dharma*, ie duty ordained by *varna*. Even more, war is an opportunity for the 'lucky' Kshatriya to gain a direct pathway to heaven.[14] From the lofty heights of philosophy to a rather mundane matter concerning the social role given by a division of labour — the descent is indeed rather abrupt. It is necessitated by the compulsion to bring in another theory of Brahmanism, its concept of *karma*.

Karma is the passed on duties of one's past lives. Depending on what one did in them, this can take one towards *moksha* or push one down to lesser births further distanced from *moksha*. *Karma* never ceases. It can neither be destroyed nor hindered. It thus protects the society from the danger of *dharma* breaking down.[15]

Here *dharma* is taken in the sense of the ordered functioning of a society. Right at the beginning of its discourse Gita gives a graphic description of what would befall a society if *dharma*

13 The justification for Rama's treacherous killing of Bali and beheading Shambuka, the shudra who dared to gain *jnana*, is founded precisely on such logic.
14 BG-2.31-2.33; GR, p381.
15 BG, 2.40; GR, p383.

were to breakdown. '*Adharma*', going against one's preordained duties, will affect everyone. It will cause the *kulastree* (noble women, women of one's clan) to go astray. This will lead to the mixing of the different *varnas*. Consequently, it will destroy each and every clan, and by implication *varna* itself. *Varna*-given duty and *kuladharma* took form in the past precisely to prevent this disaster, which is the sure path to hell.[16]

Karma and the adherence to duties prescribed by it are evidently of crucial importance for the Brahmanical *varna* (caste) order. Krishna reminds Arjuna that he cannot avoid following his *varnadharma* as ordained by *karma*. He must stick to the way of life predetermined for his *varna*. Tilak, following the Gita, argues that this provides a reliable compass for an ethics. If one is guided by one's *karma* ordained *varna* duty and does not deviate from it, one's *atma* will come close to liberation from worldly encumbrances. Since this should be the ultimate goal, the path laid down by *karma* allows one to choose the path of righteousness. Very well. But what exactly does 'guided by' mean?

Krishna not only reminds Arjuna of Kshatriya *dharma*. He goes on to explain 'you only have the power to do your *karma*; (enjoying or not enjoying) its outcome is not within your control. But this should not be made an excuse to avoid *karma* ordained duty; you must do it without any desire for its outcome'.[17] Among these instructions the first one is of great importance in a discourse on ethics. According to it, enjoying the outcome of one's *karma* given duty is beyond one's control. One can neither add nor subtract from it, hasten or delay it. So, as Tilak elaborates, the question put before Arjuna is this: why bother about what he sees as the sinful outcome of fratricidal war, when he has no control over the outcome of his *karma* bound duty?[18] But, if that is correct, then conscious choice, self-will, becomes redundant.

16 BG, 1.39, 1.44; GR, pp370-71.
17 BG, 2.47-2.48; GR, pp 386-387; (translated from Marathi).
18 GR, p 68.

Further, the dilemma of having to choose between two paths of action itself gets eliminated. Arjuna's turning away from battle could also be considered as something ordained by his *karma*. After all, going by the Gita's premise, that very thought itself cannot emerge on its own. We are thus, once again, pushed back to the starting point, still far away from arriving at a basis for ethics.

While listening to Krishna's discourse, Arjuna asks him a simple question if there is no such thing as self-will what is the impulse underlying such acts as rape? Since all action is considered to be pre-decided by *karma* this becomes a very pertinent doubt. Krishna answers this by explaining that such things are done by an extremely covetous or sinful person.[19] But even if that is accepted, the question still remains. Where did this greed and sin come from? By the principles of *karma* they too would be the outcome of past *karma*. Is the rapist then simply acting out his *karma*? In that case how can he be blamed?

The *karma* theory does not accept the excuse of inevitability, even though it judges that there is some pre-ordained impulse of *karma* in his act. It argues that he can avoid it by gaining *jnana*.[20]There is the example of Valmiki, the sage who compiled the Ramayanam. It is alleged that he, a brigand, reformed himself by chanting '*mara, mara*' which eventually gelled into '*rama, rama*'. This brings up the question of the impulse leading to the turn towards righteousness and its origins.

According to Advaita, consciousness is part of the *maya*, which too is *karma*. Therefore, it cannot, by itself, break free from *jani-mriti*. The *atma*, however, is part of the *nirguna parabrahma*. Though bound by the body it temporarily resides in, it is free of *karma*. *Atma*, being intrinsically free from *karma* and sensuous desires, gives impulses to the consciousness. It tries to guide it to the path of righteousness that will ultimately lead to *moksha*. The consciousness of a person is also open

19 BG, 3.36-3.37; GR, p 407.
20 BG, 3.38-3.43; GR, pp 407-408.

to counter-impulses of the sensuous world. It is immersed in *karma* and these impulses keep it entangled in it. Whether to heed the call of *atma* or the impulses of the sensuous world depends entirely on the concerned person.[21] There is nothing inevitably driving somebody to commit a heinous crime like rape. He can very well avoid it.

There are several contradictions in this elaboration. The *atma* is part of *parabrahma*. It too must therefore be qualityless, inert. How can it have the capacity to give impulses? Where does this come from?[22] Tilak tries to meet this query by giving the example of steam contained in a vessel. It makes its presence known by exerting pressure on the lid. If this were to be removed one wouldn't notice the steam. Similar is the case of the *atma* when bound by the body, entangled in *karma*, even though it is forever in unity with the all-pervasive *nirguna parabrahma*.

This explanation is quite revealing, apart from its logical error of comparing incomparables. The pressure of steam does not come from its being held back by a lid. Even if that lid is tight, at the most it can only aid in the build-up of pressure. The pressure of steam comes from its material state, from heat energy. The *atma* on other hand, does not, and cannot have, any

21 The whole argument made by Tilak is spread out over five pages. GR, pp 169-173.

22 Aware of this anomaly, Tilak tries to qualify this narration of the 'impulse', the 'free action' of the *atma*. He explains that he using such words, following customary usage, in order to convey the sense of the argument in brief. It is done to avoid a long description of the *karma* process. ".... (I) n its essential, pure state, the *atma* doesn't have any agency itself". (GR, p 169; translated from Marathi. Emphasis added.) But, the issue was not about using this or that term. As part of *parabrahma*, the *atma*, as such, has always to be in pure state, even when bound by a body. So where does it acquire agency from? In fact, the same applies to the *parabrahma* too. How can it generate *maya*, *karma*, the sensuous world? Advaida has no answers, except qualifying this as a 'one and only instance of generation' and attributing it to 'profound reasons beyond the grasp of mortal beings'. (GR, p 160). Yet this too is no justification for the *atma*'s agency. If it is to give impulses to the consciousness, this quality must always be present in it.

such internal impulse or motion. This is ruled out by definition itself, since it is only a part of the *nirguna parabrahma*. Most importantly, if the consciousness of a person can choose between the *atma*'s impulse and those from the sensuous world, isn't that proof of individual free will? According to Brahmanism, *karma*, by itself, is neither good nor bad. It is blind, inanimate. All such attributes of action come from the consciousness of the person doing it, from her or his intention etc.

When *karma* is excluded from any capacity to determine good or bad, when this is reserved to individual consciousness, how then can freedom of choice be denied to it? Whichever way you look at it, Advaida's concepts of *atma, nirgunabrahma, karma* etc. turn out to be self-contradictory. Or else, they push us into rank opportunism, a situation where anything goes.[23]The only resolution offered by the Gita is its coupling of *karma* with *varnadharma*. Ultimately, it is this that guides the ethics of Brahmanism.

Arjuna is advised to carry out his appointed *karma*. Tilak reminds his readers that this is nothing other than doing *varnadharma* in order to ensure the permanence of *chathurvarna*.[24] Sticking to one's *varna* ordained duty (dharma) is unequivocally insisted upon by the Gita. To drive this in, it states that even if another *varna's dharma* is pleasant while one's own is not, the latter is still salutary. Dying while doing one's *varnadharma* would be auspicious. Death, while doing another's, is horrible.[25]

The Gita was unapologetic, explicit, in extolling the *varna* order and buttressing it with claims about its divine origin. The modern votaries of Brahmanism cannot simply repeat this.

23 In fact there are several slokas in the Gita (4.28, 9.28, 18.17) where any injury caused to another by one who 'has attained *jnana*' is attributed to bad *karma* of the victim. The aggressor is absolved of attracting any 'bad' *Karma*. The act itself is not considered to have come from the aggressor's free will. (GR, p 239)

24 GR, p 203.

25 BG. 3.35; GR, p 406.

They are forced to sanitise *chathurvarna* in order to face up to contemporary democratic sentiments. They argue that *varna* is not the same as caste and insist that *varna* division was based on quality.[26] Some say that it denoted the 'natural' inclinations of individuals, which allowed their separate grouping. Some others claim that it was originally meant to denote rising grades of spirituality. The Gita had no need for such fine tuning. For it, the *varna* division was divine. It was based on differing qualities and *karma*. One is born into a *varna* as preordained by *karma*.[27]Both quality and *karma* together determine *varna*.

We have already seen the content of *karma*. As for quality, the Gita's elaboration sharply differed from those of the modern apologists of Brahmanism. It sees qualities of the *varna* as something given by 'nature', ie. by birth. The differentiation of *varna* duty flows from these inborn qualities. The Gita spells out the duties of the four *varnas*. Among them, the duty of the last one, the Shudra, is that of serving the *varna's* 'above' them. This is said to derive from their quality.[28] Evidently, that can only mean an inbuilt slave mentality. Let us not forget that this is not very far from the precepts of modern racism!

Tilak argues that the four-fold division of *chathurvarna* distributed the weight of tasks which had to be carried out for social stability and sustenance. It would not fall on any one social section. If the *varnas* failed to do their ordained duty, *chathurvarna* society would degenerate.[29] There can be no quarrel

26 *Varna* and caste are not the same. But they are closely related. Caste, so to say, took shape under the guidance of *varna* ordering. The 'Manusmriti' accounts for several castes by explaining them as the outcome of various inter-*varna* combinations. *Varna* is retained in the broad categorisation of castes into Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra. It underlies the division of castes as *savarna* and *avarna*. The former comprises castes from Brahmin to Shudra. The latter are those 'beyond' *varna*, who were never in the *varna* order, that is the Dalits, definitely, and, broadly speaking, the intermediary castes (OBCs).
27 BG, 4.13 and 18.41; GR, pages 413 and 568.
28 BG, 18.41-18.44, 18.48; GR, pp 568-69.
29 GR, p 40.

here. But why should the Shudras, who bore the load of slaving away for the other three, be concerned about this? Why should women, considered as inferior beings, root for *chathurvarna*? Additionally, the fate of those who violated *varnadharma* was also unequal. A Kshatriya would, according to the Gita, loose esteem. He will attract 'bad' *karma* and get further distanced from *moksha*.[30] If the violator is a Shudra she or he was condemned to suffer horrific punishments like getting molten lead poured into the ears. Or, they would lose their heads like Shambuka. For the oppressed, evidently, the destruction of *varna* (caste) would have been most welcome.

Brahmanism teaches that anyone who is able to realise that there is as much *atma* in another body as there is in one's own is suited for gaining *moksha*.[31] This large heartedness apparently excluded the Shudras and women. Even today, the Dalits, other oppressed castes, Adivasis and women are seen as 'lesser' beings. The ingrained disdain Brahmanism has towards them come out when the Gita speaks about the 'equanimous gaze' of a *jnani* (one who has gained *jnana*). It is said that this will be the same towards "... the true Brahmin, cow, elephant…" "... and so too the dog and chandala".[32] The hollowness of such magnanimity is well revealed in its ordering — the chandala (Dalit) gets positioned below the dog!

Duplicity in ethics is not unique to Brahmanism. Any morality rooted in the self-interests of an exploiting class must necessarily be Janus-faced. It will present itself as universal while serving narrow interests. As seen earlier, Brahmanism defended its graded division of labour and social status as something necessary for maintaining social stability. Echoing this, Tilak argues that all other societies too had one or another form of social division if not *chathurvarna*.[33] Quite true. One can also see

30 BG. 2.33-2.34; GR, p 381.
31 GR, p 236.
32 BG, 5.18; GR, p 427.
33 GR, p 40.

some similarities. For instance, such divisions were considered to be divinely ordained by all pre-capitalist societies throughout the world. Tilak further explains that the Gita's concern was not about deciding which social system is better suited for social stability. Whichever it may be, the key message delivered is that of sticking to one's given duty for the sake of social good.[34]

Here, Tilak, differentiates the ethics of Brahmanism from modern, Western views. For the former, one's duty must be done without desiring its outcome or taking pride in serving others. In the latter case, it is alleged, worldly life is essentially meant for enjoyment. Even a desire to carry out one's social duty is, at the most, guided by the thinking that such enjoyment must be available to all. It thus limits itself. Tilak concludes that the Gita's ethics is superior since it is propounded from a universal and higher level of spirituality. It is not bound by any social system. The Gita refers to *chathurvarna* solely because its discourse was delivered in a *varna* based society.[35]

Let us take a closer look at the ethics involved in what is described as the key message of the Gita — sticking to one's given duty. What immediately strikes one's mind is the arbitrary restriction it places on social mobility. Besides, any ethics that takes rigidity in social duties as its basis does not stand up to the scrutiny of history. The social mobility seen in Western capitalist countries stands in sharp contrast to the rigid social structures that were seen in their feudal pasts. Every specific division of labour is determined by the socio-economic structure prevalent in a given society. Though all societies need one or the other form of division of tasks, there is nothing to insist that a particular division of labour is inviolable or permanent. One can even conceive a future society, where, given a higher level of productivity, a formal division of labour would itself become unnecessary. Furthermore, the whole argument underlying the concept of 'given' social duties is itself quite problematic. Who

34 Ibid, p 300 and pp 406-07.
35 GR, pp 299-300.

gets to decide this? How is it determined? The Gita didn't have any problem in handling such queries. In its view, both of them were answered by the divinely given *varna* and *karma*.

For Tilak, living in times when both *varna* and caste were being challenged, the going wasn't so easy. Hence we see him advancing quite contradictory explanations for social duties given by a division of labour. They are described as given by religious scriptures ('*shastrathaha*').[36] They are also considered as duties chosen according to varying inclinations, where this is possible.[37] Both are obviously opposed to each other. For Tilak, the crux lies in "sticking to one's duty" no matter whether it is given or chosen.

The progress of humanity through various forms of social ordering or grouping has been noted by Tilak. However, the rigidity of his thought process leads him to deny their historical determination and the progress of humanity through them. According to Tilak, we have arrived at the realisation that all humanity is one through a lengthy process. Humanity passed through stages or periods of pride in one's clan, then caste, religion and country. This categorisation raises several questions. But what is more critical is his insistence that these groupings should be retained. The argument is that every generation must necessarily pass along this trajectory in order to attain the highest level.[38] An inevitable implication would be the periodic restoration of the outmoded.

The whole history of humanity is witness to a broadening of consciousness. It thus arrived at the concept of the human — not man or woman, of this or that country, or of one or other caste/clan/tribe/class etc. Presently it is breaking off from anthropocentrism to arrive at a broader view. This locates humans among other species. Not a master over them, but as a part of Nature, along with them. This was the outcome of passing through various social stages and forms of social organisations

36 Ibid, p 299.
37 Ibid, p 300.
38 Ibid, p 242.

over generations. Reverses have happened. It was not a linear process. However, these slide-backs were not inevitable or necessary for the training of new generations. Each one of them gained from past knowledge and practices through a human construct — culture.

The ethics of Brahmanism takes the permanency of social division of labour (whatever form it may take) and sticking to duties given by it as its basis. It rests its claims about its ethics being eternal and universal on this foundation. Its claim is negated by the fact that every division of labour is transient. Moreover, the division of labour of every exploitative society mainly serves the interests of exploiters. Hence it is oppressive for the masses. It can never be equally good for all members of the society.

To sum up, when guided by its concepts of *atma* and *nirgunabrahma*, Brahmanism fails to give any definitive guidance for ethical action. When it relies on *karma* and *varnadharma*, it fails the tests of eternality and universality. Brahmanism's ethics is thus nothing other than a legitimisation of class, caste (*varna*) and gender oppression. There is nothing differentiating it, in essence, from the ethics of any other ideology serving exploitation. It is only a particular instance of the bankruptcy of the ethics based on idealism.

By its very nature, idealism can never derive principles of ethics from human existence in all its diversity and concreteness. It must necessarily resort to impositions. This can come in varying *avatars*. It could come as a god, a nebulous supreme power or an absolute idea. Whichever it may be, ethics then comes from edicts or pre-determined principles given by that supra-human entity. In the idealist view, the ordering of society and the positioning of individuals within it are invariably projected as something divinely sanctioned. Along with other ruling ideological forms of that society, its ethics too serves to legitimise the existing state of affair. It thus furthers and secures the interests of those classes, which stand to gain from that particular social structure at the expense of the great majority.

§

The Limits of Absolute Monism

'Like a jackal trapped in a lion's gaze, all other sciences cower before Vedanta' — such is Brahmanism's boast about its core philosophy.[39] However, the history of conflicts and contestations among various South Asian philosophical schools belies this arrogance. Most of these schools were idealist. Materialist ones like Lokayata and Carvaka were suppressed. In fact, what we know about them mainly come from the counter-narratives given by idealist schools in the process of negating them. Despite this dominant sway of idealism, Advaida (Vedanta)[40] could enjoy supremacy for only brief spells ... all the way until the advent of colonialism.

Some of the basic precepts of Advaida comes from the Vedas. However, their elaboration as theological philosophy arrives with the Upanishads, dated to approximately 800 BCE. Parallel to the Vedic tradition, what is known as the *Sramana* (non-Vedic) tradition too developed over this period. It seems to have influenced the progress from Vedic ritualism to the metaphysical plane seen in the Upanishads. Just a few centuries after the Upanishads, the *Sramana* tradition gave birth to the Bauddha and Jaina religions with their distinct philosophies. Among them Buddhism dominated South Asian theological philosophy for approximately eighteen centuries (6 BCE to 12 CE). Though Adi Sankara (788-820 CE) is reported to have overthrown its reign

39 Strictly speaking, Vedanta refers to all schools of philosophy that take the 'Brahmasutras' as their foundational text. But it has usually been employed as a synonym of Advaida, as it was in this quote taken from Bal Gangadhar Tilak's 'Gita Rahasya'.

40 Advaida means 'non-dual'. It is termed by some as monism. That is not accurate since Advaida represents only one type of monism.

and re-established the supremacy of Advaida, the fact remains that Nalanda, the leading centre of learning in the sub-continent till its destruction in 1200 CE by Bakhtiar Khilji, was Buddhist.

Over this long stretch of time, and further on, no one theology enjoyed total domination to the exclusion of the others. Besides, Buddhism and Jainism underwent considerable transformations. Vedic schools of thought co-existed with them. Kingdoms guided by Brahmanical principles emerged. The transition from *varna* to caste was formalised. The Brahmanical moral code was compiled and elaborated through texts like the Manusmriti. All of these factors, along with internal degeneration of the Bauddha and Jaina schools, led to their accommodation of a great deal of Brahmanical values legitimising caste and other social constructs, originally inimical to them. The dominant version of Bauddha philosophy even anticipated much of the *mayavad* expounded by Sankara.

The dilution of Buddhism's core concepts was one of the factors aiding Sankara in his assault on it. Brutal force, literally decapitating the principal votaries of the Bauddha and Jaina schools, buttressed it. It would have played a significant role in complimenting Sankara's rhetorical skills and aiding his ascension. But hardly 200 years had passed before Advaida was challenged and dislodged from its prime position by Ramanuja's (1017–1137 CE) Vishistadvaida. It was followed by Madhva's (1238–1317 CE) Dvaidavada.[41] Both of them rejected Advaida's absolute monism. They brought back dualist discourses on to the main stage of *Astika* (Vedic) philosophy. Continuing the tradition, several other schools followed them. Each had their interpretation of monism and dualism. Notably, all of them worked out their theses within the frame of Brahmanism's sacred texts — the Vedas, Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita.

So what does this account tells us? Over three millennia, from the Upanishadic period till its revival during the

41 Vishishtadavaida is 'qualified Advaida'. Dvaidavada is dualism.

18th-19th centuries, Advaida enjoyed philosophical supremacy only for a brief spell. Throughout this stretch of time, either *Sramana* schools or *Astika* schools of thought that proposed one or the other form of combining monism and dualism held sway.[42] The 'rediscovery' of Advaida as the core philosophy of Hinduism, was a construct of colonialism.[43] It was a component of the Orientalist presentation of an Aryan golden age with its high philosophy and spirituality. Reformers of Brahmanism, such as Raja Rammohan Roy and others, gladly embraced this. Over the centuries it has been further consolidated. So much so that Vishistadvaida, Dvaidavada and other theologies have been edged out, more or less completely, into the rarefied realm of esoteric philosophical discourse. Even then, the question remains — what was the impulse underlying their fresh interpretations of Brahmanism's sacred texts, steadily departing from Advaida? I would argue that these arose from multiple fault lines in Advaida — theological, philosophical and sociological.

Advaida insists on a monism that is absolute. The only 'real' for it is '*nirgunabrahma*', which is formless, qualityless, indescribable, undefinable and eternal. Everything else is '*maya*' or '*midhya*', illusion. *Maya* does not mean 'non-existent' in Advaida. The existence of a sensuous universe is acknowledged. But it exists only for the sensory organs. Hence it is considered unreal, untrue. Beyond it lies *nirgunabrahma*. This alone is real

42 It may be argued that Advaida remained a live tradition through various Bhakti schools during the middle ages. Its insistence on 'oneness' would have been an attractive proposition for these streams opposing the Brahmanical caste order. Yet, in actuality, their philosophies were versions of modified Advaida, with emphasis on worship of a God — thereby implying the accomodation of dualism.

43 During the period immediately preceding colonial rule, the Nyaya-Vaisesika school enjoyed prominence in the new interpretations and lively debates going on in the South Asian philosophical realm. Jonardon Ganeri's 'The Lost of Age of Reason' gives a good introduction to this period. The British role in appointing Advaita to the prime position of South Asian philosophy was noted by Trevor Ling in his 'Karl Marx and Religion'.

and true. By this logic god too is *maya*. Adi Sankara in fact argued as such. He was consistently applying an Upanishadic stream of thought, where god, heaven and such were declared to be minor compared to awareness of *nirgunabrahma* and the unity of one's '*atma*' (soul) with it. Such awareness, '*jnana*', was hailed as the path to '*moksha*' (liberation) from the otherwise ceaseless cycle of '*jani-mriti*' , ie. of birth and death.

The monism seen here certainly represented a higher level of abstraction, of synthesis. However, in spite of such philosophical and spiritual merits, it would be immensely unfulfilling at the level of religious thought. Any theology must necessarily address the social role of religion, of solace, social communion and ethics. This then is the space of god; the award of heaven and retribution of hell. The absolute monism of Advaida doesn't allow this. Amends had to be made. Therefore, despite its strident monism, Advaida has always summoned up god, even if it is done as *maya*. Similarly, it makes room for the diversity, the multiplicities of the world; once again as *maya*. However, the logic employed to introduce such contortions opens up several doors of doubts in the philosophical realm.

Take the classic example offered by Sankara, of mistaking a rope for a snake. This was supposed to demonstrate the '*adhyaropa*' (superimposition) caused by illusion that emerges from *avidya* (ignorance) of the sole real, ie. *nirgunabrahma*. Thus, similar to the 'rope as snake' confusion, the ignorant err in thinking that the sensuous world is real and fail to go beyond it to *nirgunabrahma*, the 'really real'.

A rope and snake do form a plausible pair capable of causing confusion. But, one could wonder, what if the encountered object was a stone? Whatever may be the confused perception, it would certainly not be of a snake. The reason is rather obvious — dissimilarity of shape. We thus see that Sankara's conclusion does not logically flow from the comparison. Rather, the example itself constitutes the logic. It already presupposes the observer's

acquaintance with both rope and snake, of their shapes and, most importantly, their differing implications for humans. By extension, to superimpose various qualities and forms on *maya*, we must first be aware of them. Where could that come from?

Proponents of Advaida have produced an endless series of explanations to account for the world of objects registered by our sensory organs. We will sample some of them, referring to Bal Gangadhar Tilak's 'Gita Rahasya'.[44] To the question of how a qualityless entity (*nirgunabrahma*) can produce diverse qualities (objects), Tilak takes shelter in sophistry. He claims that the question itself doesn't arise since nothing is 'produced'. What are sensed as objects are only illusionary representations.[45] But, whether produced or not, Advaida must account for the diverse, sensuous, objects surrounding us. Tilak gives the example of sound and the colour spectrum of sunlight to satisfy this need.[46] Physics instructs us that the former is caused by motion in the air or some other medium. The latter are electro-magnetic waves. But Tilak leaves out all such particularities and presents them simply as 'motion'. He then goes on to assert that our ears and eyes register them as sound and colour because they have superimposed these qualities on what is actually one and the same thing, ie. motion. *Maya* similarly causes us to 'see' diverse objects, when what really exists is only *nirgunabrahma*.

Let us unravel this by beginning from the concluding assertion. We see an object only if it reflects light. Our ears hear sound only if air or some medium is set in motion. Neither of them depends on our sense organ. No matter how we name the phenomena, we can never superimpose any other quality on them arbitrarily. They are natural phenomena, each with its own particularity. Besides, our eyes cannot be willed to hear, nor can our ears see or smell. These and other sensory organs can only register those specific types of sensation for which they are suited.

44 'Gita Rahasya' [GR], Bal Gangadhar Tilak, 26th Marathi Edition, Pune, 2015.
45 GR, pp 143-144.
46 Ibid, p 144.

Finally, even if all this is ignored, the question of why at all our sensory organs get this urge to impose various attributes, where it comes from, remains. Tilak's answer is stark in its dogmatism — the senses did so 'because' they themselves are part of the web of *maya* woven by *nirgunabrahma*.[47] So much for Advaida's claim to be scientific!

An escape from this philosophical dead end of absolute monism was sought by borrowing Sankhya's '*prakriti-purusha*' dualism.[48] According to this philosophical school, *prakriti* is unmanifest, yet laden with the potential qualities of '*sat, raj, tamas*'. Through manifesting these qualities in various permutations and combinations, in the presence of the inert *purusha*, *prakriti* brings into existence diverse qualities (sensuous objects). Further combinations lead to the emergence of new objects from existing ones. Advaida employs this scheme to explain the sensuous world, all the while insisting that *nirgunabrahma* remains unmanifest, lying even beyond *prakriti* and *purusha*. It is claimed to be the root cause of both of them. They, in turn, are said to be outcomes of *maya*.[49]

There is a glaring contradiction in this argument. The Sankhya *prakriti*, though unmanifest, is attributed with qualities held in potential. It is therefore determined and it makes sense to conceive further generation from it. But this cannot be true of *nirgunabrahma* which is not only unmanifest but is supposed to be qualityless, infinite, eternal etc. It thus evades determination and it makes no sense to speak of something following it or caused by it.

Moreover, why at all should *nirgunabrahma* give rise to

47 Ibid, p 145.

48 Backed by rigorous textual analysis, Deviprasad Chattopadhya's monumental work 'Lokayata' has conclusively argued that, originally, Kapila's Sankhya did not have a '*purusha*' concept. Chattopadhya pointed out that this was a later-day addition seen in the first, known, written text — Easwarakrishna's 4 CE 'Sankhyakarika'. Tilak has relied on this text, usually taken as the authoritative exposition of Sankhya.

49 Ibid, p 145.

maya, *prakriti* and *purusha*? The answer given by Advaida is a non-answer. It simply states that this is an unfathomable '*leela*' (play) of *nirgunabrahma*.[50] The Gita has Krishna informing Arjuna that when even the gods don't know the answer how can we expect this of humans?[51] Tilak calls in the *Nasadiya Sukta* of the Rigveda as substantiation. That *sukta* speaks of 'nothingness' from which everything came. It further states that no one, perhaps not even that which caused this, knows why this was done or happened.[52] This *sukta* has been used to 'prove' the generation of *maya* as something unfathomable. But it could also be used as an argument for spontaneous generation, thus ruling out any role for a power in the creation of something from nothing!

Advaida's summoning of god, even if as a part of *maya* and its relying on some of Sankhya's key premises, amounts to smuggling in dualism. This is quite visible in texts as varied as the Gita and Patanjali's 'Yogasutra', to name a couple. Tributes to absolute monism are repeatedly seen in the Gita. Yet, it also attests Samkhya dualism. The Gita is supposed to be the advice given by a God, Krishna, to Arjuna. He claims to have created *maya* as '*parameshwara*' (supreme god, a term used interchangeably with *nirgunabrahma*). He also states he himself (as a god) is *maya*. Metaphysics aside, what comes through is the uneasy relation of Advaida's monism with a borrowed dualism.

The Gita, being the advice of a god, must necessarily acknowledge this duality. But that is not so for Patanjali's Yogasutra. This text elaborates the process of meditation aimed at attaining union with *nirgunabrahma* through realising it as the sole truth. It defines '*yoga*' as the freeing of the *atma* from all sensory encumbrances. Therefore, the Yogasutra could very well have insisted on the absolute monism of the Advaida, the philosophy which it adheres to. Yet, it too ushers in duality. On the one hand it proposes meditation through chanting '*Om*',

50 Ibid, p 160.
51 Gita, 10.2; GR, p 156.
52 GR, p 153.

which is equated with *nirgunabrahma*. *Yoga* is declared as a method through which '*sadhana*' (union with *parabrahma*) can be attained, without calling on a god. However, it also states that the worshipping of a god can help one attain *sadhana* "sooner".[53]

The active, operative, aspect here is faith in a god and the mental concentration it could facilitate. Duality is thus accepted as necessary in the passage to monism. One arrives at monism through duality. The latter then has its own space and action. This commentator of the Yogasutra explicitly states that *yoga* is useful only till a certain stage. Beyond that Sankhya is a must for attaining *sadhana*.[54]

What is explicitly acknowledged in the Yogasutra is implicit in all the interpretations and treatises of Advaida. Absolute monism cannot but drag along dualism. Its absolutist stance deprives it of any possible elaboration from within itself, on its own terms, that could account for differentiation and the sensuous universe. Whichever may be the text of Brahmanism that posits or elaborates Advaida, the stubborn presence of dualism is all too noticeable. Yet, it is forever the embarrassing intrusion. This has implications beyond the concerns of philosophy.

We have seen that Advaida considers god to be part of *maya*, the untrue. However, in its social *avatar*, as the ideological core of the ruling class, Brahmanism could not but engage with god; that too in their teeming crores (33 crores by one count)! The spread and elaboration of the caste system made this even more vital. Hegemonic assimilation unique to Brahmanism was accompanied by an enthronement of tribal gods or totems in subordinate positions in the Brahmanic pantheon. Obviously, the Advaida philosophy, declaring gods as unreal, wouldn't be of use here. Its denial of 'trueness' to gods was of course equally applicable to the Brahmanic trinity — Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. But, 'equality' of denial wouldn't be satisfactory for the

53 'Patanjali Yogasutra' with commentary by Nandlal Dashora, Randhir Prakasan, Haridwar, 2009, p 38. (in Hindi)
54 Ibid, p 39.

vast masses of assorted believers. They needed their gods to be real, real enough to heed their prayers and grant them solace. Making gods 'true' thus inevitably emerged as a pressing issue of Vedanta theology.[55] It was further aggravated by the struggle against caste.

There is a long tradition in South Asia of religious, social reformers who, in their confrontation with the caste system, tried to undermine it through fresh interpretations of Brahmanism's sacred texts. Much of this centred on Gita. The Gita allows for three paths to *moksha — jnana*, *karma* and *bhakti*. The *jnana* path is that of acquiring awareness of *nirgunabrahma* through meditation. Naturally, proponents of Advaida like Adi Sankara claimed it to be the purest, most appropriate one. For this very reason, in the eyes of the reformers, it could not be a solution. Similarly, the path of *karma* (action) too was compromised. Brahmanism conceives *karma* as carrying out binding duty preordained for every *varna* (caste). What remained was *bhakti*, devotion to and worship of god. *Bhakti* had the potential for social levelling and the elimination of intermediaries.[56] However, this

55 Brahmanism declares the 'god' concept as something designed for the 'less intelligent', ie. those incapable of gaining *jnana* through contemplation of a formless, qualityless, *nirgunabrahma.* But, the real theological, sociological, need underpinning it is seen in Tilak's explanation of why a '*prathyaksha roopdhari*' (one who has visible form) is necessary and his enumeration of its qualities — "... One who speaks to me, who has affection for me, who guides me on the path of righteousness, who will condone my errors, whom I can call mine, who protects me like a father." (GR, p 252.) In other words, a provider of solace and guidance — including to those with 'higher' intelligence!

56 Tilak admits the role of *bhakti* in addressing the spiritual needs of women and the *varna* (Shudra) excluded from gaining *jnana*, as an 'additional' factor, apart from being suitable for the '*alpabudhi samanya jana*' (less intelligent common masses) [GR, p 267]. He draws attention to a *sloka* of the Gita (9.32; GR, p 468) which states that 'those who put full trust in me even if they be women, Vaisya, Shudra or Antyajas, can gain *moksha*.' While this seems very generous, the next *sloka* puts it in perspective when it adds 'then what would be the case of the pious Brahmin or Kshatriya who are my followers (*bhakts*)? (9.33; GR, p 468) Though Tilak tries to stretch the former *sloka's* meaning and claim '*bhakti*' to be

requires that the gods be true, not unreal *maya*. Thus the stage was set for breaking the absolutist mould of Advaida's monism. Duality had to be given a formal entry in the Vedantic tradition. It had to be acknowledged as a necessary, inherent, component of philosophical and theological discourse.

Ramanuja was the first to expand this through his Vishistadvaida. He argued that '*jeev*' *(atma)* and '*jagath*' (sensuous universe) are both contained within '*easwar*' (supreme god). The *easwar* of Vishistadvaida, which takes the place of *nirgunabrahma*, is thus unitary but differentiated. The duality of *jeev* and *jagath* it contains are as true as it is itself. The multifarious universe and *atmas* evolved from the original *jagath* and *jeev*. Furthermore by declaring worship of god (*bhakti*) as the path to *moskha*, Ramanuja reduced caste determined *karma* to insignificance.[57]

With Ramanuja god became true. But the contradictions inherent in his attempt to legitimise dualism on a monist basis remained. They became the entry point for Madhva's Dvaidavada, ie. explicit and absolute dualism. Madhva reasoned that *jeev* (*atma*) and *parameshwara* (*paramatama*) could not be one and different at the same time. Hence, his Dvaidavada conceived both to be always different, distinct, from each other. For him too *karma* was only a minor means, while worship of god was the sole path to *moksha*.

Madhva was followed by a number of theologist philosophers. All of them attempted to either amend his dualism or propound yet one more version of linking up Advaida with dualism. No matter what, Advaida and its absolute monism were displaced from the centre of philosophical-theological debate among the

a levelling factor across *varnas* (GR, p 237) the Gita evidently did not have this view. The interpretation and deployment of *bhakti* as a social leveller was a contribution of the Bhakti movements challenging Brahmanism.

57 This account and the one of Madhva's Dvaidavada are based on the brief summary seen in Tilak's 'Gita Rahasya'.

Astikas for centuries together. However, being part of the *Astika* stream, the discourses of the new philosophies shared many basic precepts with it. *Moksha* as liberation from *jani-mriti*, *maya*, the relation of *atma* and *paramatama* and many other concepts were recurring themes. Their interpretations, of course, varied.

The dethroning of Advaida was, in great measure, inspired by the quest to make room for anti-caste reforms. In turn, it gained impetus from the stirrings of the Bhakti movements in the South Indian peninsula. These movements, seen from early middle ages onwards, critiqued Brahmanist concepts, values and its caste system. Ramanuja is known to have broken from Brahmanist orthodoxy and strictures. He taught its sacred texts to Shudras, who were banned from even hearing their recital and made them '*dvijas*' (twice born, allowed to wear sacred thread).

Among the Bhakti streams of the thought of this period, Basava and his companions (12 CE) take the place of honour. Basava's Lingayat movement was an all-out attack on the oppressive concepts and practices of Brahmanism, such as the caste system and the demeaning of women. One of Basava's trenchant *vachanas* makes fun of the Brahminic taboo on menstruation by pointing to its role in reproduction. Basava did not appeal to Brahmanic texts like the Vedas, Smritis, Gita etc. for his authority. He squarely declared the washer-man, wood cutter and others of the 'lowest of the low' as his venerated gurus. Though centred on the worship of Shiva, Lingayat *bhakti* was radically different from other Bhakti movements.

Basava propounded '*Kayakame Kailasam*'. This conveys the message that one's labour is the supreme form of worship. Mocking the ritualism of those who considered pilgrimage to Kailas mountain (the mythical abode of Shiva) as exalted, he sarcastically queried whether their Shiva was a fool to live in that desolate place where even a blade of grass wouldn't grow! In its original vision the Lingayat movement was opposed to temples. They were attacked by Basava as cages imprisoning god.

Lingayat priests were commanded to be forever on the move, never tarrying in any place. The logic Basava advanced for these precepts and practices was profoundly dialectical — *'All that stands will wither away, that which moves will stand.'*

One sees influence of Bauddha and Jaina dialectics, apart from Kashmiri Shaivism and the folk philosophies of the labouring classes in the Lingayat world outlook. They went into Basava's forging a radically new school in philosophy. Positioning it as a transcendence of the various South Asian idealist philosophical schools, achieved through rich synthesis, is a theme worth exploring. It critiqued many views seen in various idealist schools. For example, it rejected the '*karma*' theory (*karma-punarjanma-moksha*), commonly seen in all the classical idealist schools, including Bauddha and Jaina ones. But this was not an absolutist rejection. The monist tradition and the *Sramana* tradition's emphasis on motion and impermanence were synthesised.

Unfortunately, its rich discourse as witnessed in the philosophical debates said to have taken place in the Anubhava Mandapa are mostly lost. Only a compilation, the 'Sunya Sampadane', made during the Vijayanagara Empire (14 CE) is available. By this time the Lingayat movement had lost its radical edge. Already, it was well into being assimilated by Brahmanism as yet another sect. What started out as a staunch caste-free community itself became stratified with caste division. The esoteric turn of the verses in the 'Sunya Sampadane', their very style, is far removed from the lively, earthy, *vacanas* of Basava and colleagues.

Other than social factors, the idealism of this philosophical school too must have contributed to this slide. Idealism inevitably limits, truncates, dialectical thought. To cite another example, Jaina '*Anekanta*' (a-singularity) espouses a dialectics that perceives opposites as integral to a single whole. Creation and destruction are seen as a constant ongoing process. Yet,

the idealism it bears as theology conceives the soul as eternal, imperishable, permanent. Dialectics is thus pushed aside by absolute monism, now brought back by idealism.

This is by no means an infirmity solely attached to idealism. Even a materialism that adheres to absolute monism would be equally inconsistent. Consider the logic of a materialism that posits some primordial matter as the source of all animate and inanimate sensuous phenomena. This absolutist concept of matter chokes off the possible emergence of new qualities. Not only that, essence and appearance, quantity and quality, in short everything, must be attributed to it from outside. The diversity of material existence must also be explained by external causes. This would necessarily be subjective and arbitrary, thus bringing in idealism! Quite unsurprisingly, all of this gels well with the categories of Advaida — *nirgunabrahma* as the single source, the superimposition of qualities and so on.

The leap from idealism to materialism is not a matter of simply replacing 'idea' with 'matter' as primary. Consistent materialism insists on grasping 'matter' as a philosophical category. It is an abstraction from the essence and appearance of the multitude of objective phenomena, animate and inanimate, populating the universe. The monist view was a momentous leap in philosophy. It allows us to recognise the identity, unity, of various phenomena and grasp their interconnectedness. Thus, the dialectical materialist position, *'All that exists is matter in motion',* comprehends the whole universe. However, monism, when taken to the extreme, becomes its opposite. Absolute monism denies objective existence to duality or diversity. As a result, it is forced to surreptitiously make room for dualism

An important lesson that emerges loud and clear is that seeing similarities between philosophical systems merely on the basis of their monism would be widely off the mark. This, in fact, was the case with the CPM theoretician, the late EMS Namboodiripad, hailing the monism of Adi Sankara's Advaida.

The errors of Advaida were solely identified in its idealism, its *mayavad*, leaving out the contradictions of its absolute monism. Such fractured views arose from EMS' mechanical materialist approach.

The undivided CPI, and later CPI and CPM, miserably failed in identifying and drawing on the rich dialectical legacy of South Asian philosophical schools. Rather, instead of focussing ideological struggle on Brahmanical schools of thought, they were valorised, as seen in the case of Advaida. Long before their formal abdication of the revolutionary path, they had laid the foundation for collaboration with the ruling classes. The lone exception, in the field of philosophy, was Rahul Sankritayan who did much to bring out the teachings of Buddhist dialectics. As could be expected, he was side-lined.

The mechanical materialism of the CPI and CPM buttress Brahmanism. Their extolling of the Brahmanic precept of '*unity in diversity*' is a telling example. Presenting a pose of accepting diversities, the real thrust of this precept is to reduce all diversity to mere manifestations of some unique, single entity. As noted earlier, to see the unity (unifying factors, interconnectedness or identical elements) among diverse phenomena is an advance made possible by monism. It rescues us from remaining restricted to appearances and viewing objects in isolation from each other. A dialectical understanding of monism helps us comprehend this unity as derived from, abstracted from, the interconnectedness of diverse phenomena. Its objectivity is given by the very objectivity of the real, material elements comprising the diversity. But Brahmanism's absolute monism turns this on its head and insists that 'unity' is the only real. Diversity is a mere outcome of its projections, a manifestation.

Advaida terms concrete objects in the sensuous universe as '*namarupa*', ie. that which has name and form. As seen in Tilak's exposition, this philosophy goes on to insist that, since these '*namarupa*' keep on changing, there must be something beyond

them which remains unchanged.[58]

This assertion is easily contradicted. Though a number of material phenomena are fluid, volatile, there are so many more that are relatively stable. Even those that are fluid have a certain stability, which differentiates them from other phenomena. The assertion of ever changing *namarupa* is made by Advaida to bring in its supposed opposite, a permanent 'something' beyond them. *Namarupa* are pictured as a thin film on water. "We are compelled to state that the many *namarupa* are like a film on some singular, root, material. ... We are pushed to the inference of this essence, which though unmanifest, cannot be sensed ... never becomes non-existent".[59]

Tilak gives the example of various types of ornaments made of gold as proof of this assertion — "If there is nothing at the root of the sensed manifestations then ... there won't be any basis for our knowledge that despite being different [these ornaments] have been made from a single [thing] gold... Gold is that which forms the basis of all the different ornaments.[60] Gold is a natural element. Even in its purest form, as for example an atom, it can still be detected. It is thus a *namarupa*, to borrow Advaida's language. This is precisely why we can distinguish an ornament made of gold from a fake. Contrarily, the *nirgunabrahma* of Advaida, the 'something' that is supposed to be beyond everything, can never be sensed; by definition itself. It forever remains a supreme figment of imagination. The unity it is said to represent thus turns out to be an imagined construct. It is not an abstraction derived from concrete reality. Quite significantly, one of the accusations made by Brahmanism against South Asian materialist thought was that its insistence on many essences denied the singular unity asserted by Advaida.[61]

Carried over into the ideological make up the ruling classes,

58 GR, p 131.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Gita, 16.8; GR, pp 516-517.

'*unity in diversity*' is a prominent element of the hegemonic consensus evolved by them. Whether it be the Gandhi-Nehru Congress stream or the Savarkar-Golwalker Hinduvadi stream, '*unity in diversity*' underpins the reactionary notions of national integration and Indian nation, denying the multinational character of the country. It is employed to deny Adivasi people their ethnic identities.

The CPI-CPM leadership have become staunch proponents of this Brahmanist precept. They acclaim it as the 'strength' of the Indian polity. There is, however, a notable difference in emphasis. The CPI-CPM leaders stress on 'diversity' in contrast to the RSS insistence on 'unity'. But it is still firmly placed in a common frame set up by Brahmanism. This causes a blunting of the ideological, political attack on Brahmanic Hinduvadi fascism. Worse, it traps many who wish to join this struggle in a pretence, a superficial opposition, allowing the ruling classes to contain it within safe channels.

To repeat, for dialectical materialism, the primacy of matter over mind as a defining principle of materialism means the primacy of objective reality in all its diversity. It rejects any notion of some entity termed 'matter', which forms the permanent source, basis or material of objective reality. Dialectical materialism, as opposed to the absolute monism of Advaida, does not dismiss duality, diversity. It transcends both absolute monism as well as dualism. As Lenin put it, dialectics is '*the splitting of the single whole and the study of its opposites'; the study of their interrelation and struggle*.' Thus, a synthesised view of singularity and duality in their unity and opposition is achieved.

We saw how a materialism that embraces absolute monism complements idealism. Taking this as guidance, the critique of absolute monism can be fruitfully extended to achieve greater clarity on Marxist analytical categories. For example, how should the primacy of class in social analysis be grasped and applied? Often, at times spontaneously, class is treated

as some self-existent material phenomena. Class analysis then becomes a matter of matching social groups with various pre-fixed criteria and their subsequent classification. This is really of no use in grasping the actual dynamics of the society under study. Social reality is a complex ensemble of relations that are generated, sustained, reproduced and changed through social practice of the individuals who are part of that society. Class is an abstraction made from this social reality. Its material basis is the position of people in the process of production and distribution of the surplus.

Though one of the most basic ones in social existence (the other being reproduction), production is not the only social relation humans enter into. Individuals belonging to a class are also differentiated by various other social relations. In our context, to name some of the prominent ones, they included those of caste, gender, ethnicity, regionality, nationality and religious community. Class, therefore, is mediated through all of them. Furthermore, each of these have their specific dynamic which impinges on that of class. Such nuances must necessarily be grasped if we are to carry out a comprehensive class analysis of a society, if we wish to to make a concrete analysis of its classes, their interrelations and the social consciousness of their members. On the contrary, if class is taken in isolation or if its mediations are grasped in a linear, absolutist, manner, then the social view being generated would be subjective and truncated. At an extreme, it would lead to crass forms of class reductionism.

Guarding against absolutist tendencies, the analytical categories of Marxism must be grasped and applied with full awareness of their limits as abstractions. '*One divides into two*' is equally applicable to them, just as much as to material phenomena. Such foresight is of greater importance in the case of a category like class, which is more determinant. Otherwise, rather than illuminating reality it will be obscure it.

Every tendency of one-sided mechanical thinking has an

absolutist core. There is an insistence of the sort 'this and this only', a refusal to view the matter at hand from multiple angles. The inherent presence of the opposite side is either ignored or denied. No law, no analytical category, can grasp the pulsating, dynamic complexity of objective reality in its completeness. That is why Lenin pointed out that they 'freeze reality'. This is an unavoidable infirmity in the process of knowing. But that doesn't make such 'freezing' worthless. By identifying the key features, the principal one among them, the contradictions driving them, our abstractions allow us to grasp a phenomenon in its essentials. Guiding our practice, this, in turn, helps us to delve deeper into its complexity, which is both inherent to it as well as a product of its interconnections with other phenomena. Yet, we cannot forget that the problems inherent to any 'freezing' are also true.

Not just categories and laws, ideology, itself is subject to this. Ideology, understood as world view, is universal. In its actual development it is the totality of ideas associated with revolutionary praxis in both the practical and theoretical spheres. Praxis always addresses a particular concrete, situation or issue. Hence, the dialectics of particularity and universality is ever present in ideology. This must be firmly kept in mind while applying it. What was particular to a situation? What is universal in the received ideology ? Much hinges on a correct assessment.

For example, in the view of Marx and Engels, derived from then existing conditions, proletarian revolution was expected in countries where capitalism had developed. All through the Second International period, this was taken as a basic position. Leading theoreticians — Kautsky, Plekhanov and others —were citing it to justify their opposition to the proletariat leading a revolution in Russia, which was still quite backward. In a sense, they were 'standing firm' on ideology. In actual fact, the emergent reality of imperialism and the new potential for revolution it offered were being denied. In their received ideology, the pre-imperialist world condition remained 'frozen'. Its vision now

came back as an imposition on the new reality, inserted through their ideological understanding. Ideology as guidance turned into ideology as false consciousness. It took a Lenin to rupture from the redundant in Marxism and develop it to a new height through revolutionary theory and practice.

Objective and subjective conditions change over time with the working out of inherent contradictions. Class struggle is part of this. The revolutionary praxis of the proletariat is guided by its ideology. But that very practice sets up and unleashes a dynamic between revolution and counter revolution. This in turn brings about significant changes in the conditions of practice, especially when the class struggle is a long drawn out one. Major contradictions, on which the strategy of practice was firmed up, may well remain. But the emergence of new facets or the waning of some earlier prominent ones, is inevitable. And this has great significance for further advance. If these are not identified in time and ideological, political positions and practices are not developed accordingly, the earlier ideological understanding and practice will become fetters. They will be generating false consciousness. This potential for transforming into false consciousness is ever present in ideology. '*One divides into two*' must be applied here if we are to guard against it.

Monism was a leap from the 'both this and that' confusion of dualism. Dualist thought hampered, blinded, synthesis and the deepening of knowledge. However, to be consistent, monism must be dialectical, that too on a materialist basis. This is the great achievement of Marxism. It drew out the full potential of monism by pointing out that '*every single whole is a unity of opposites*'. Nothing exists by itself or in and through itself. Everything exists in interconnection, interpenetration. This must be addressed by monism. While insisting on oneness, singularity, it must simultaneously accept multiplicity. Any monism that refuses to do so, such as the absolute monism of Advaida, will inevitably end up as an eclectic mash-up with dualism.

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Going Beyond The Toleration Paradigm

November 26, 2015, commemorated as Constitution Day, became an occasion for a two-day debate in both houses of parliament. Secularism was one hot topic. Pushing the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) line, Home Minister Rajnath Singh tried to rename secularism as '*panthnirapeksha*'. He was opposed by the Congress and others. They insisted on continuing with '*dharmanirapeksha*', as termed till now. All hues of the ruling class political spectrum broadly agree that secularism is to be understood as 'not differentiating among religions'. The RSS tries to buttress its views by citing this. Since '*dharm*' means religion in general, it demands this should be replaced by '*panth*'.[62] '*Panth*' refers to a specific religious belief. Therefore, the RSS argues, it is more appropriate to convey the meaning of 'not differentiating among religions'.

This is a devious argument. '*Panth*' connotes something more than a separate religious belief. Take the case of the Vaishnava, Shaiva *panths* or the Shia, Sunni ones. Despite differing from each other in many significant ways, both of these pairs come within the broader belief systems of Hinduism and Islam. Therefore, though *'panth*' is a distinct belief it is still within, a part of, some religion. So why is the Sangh Parivar trying to switch '*dharm*' for '*panth*'? It is preparing grounds for formally replacing secularism

62 The word '*dharm*' has many connotations. It has been used to denote social order, as well as *varna*-ordained duty. Besides meaning religion in general, a narrower definition, such as 'Hindu Dharm', indicating a specific religion, is also seen in authoritative texts.

as presently seen in the Constitution with the Brahmanist notion of toleration. This merits deeper probing. But before taking that up let us first examine the official Indian conceptualisation of secularism.

Whether *dharm* or *panth*, the crux of the conceptualisation is contained in the second half of word – '*nirapekshak*'. This can be loosely translated as 'regardless of'. We can then expand '*dharmanirapekshak*' as 'no matter what the religion may be'. That is, the state will deal with all citizens equally, irrespective of their religious faith. That, of course, is well and good. But isn't this a matter of democracy, where all citizens are supposed to be treated equally? In a democracy, such equitable treatment is not restricted to religion alone. Regardless of their economic status, race, caste or gender, a democratic state is constitutionally mandated to treat all citizens as equal. In other words, equal status and rights for citizens of different faiths in a democratic state is not a matter of secularism. It is the application of democracy.

So what does it mean to declare that secularism means being '*nirapekshak*' of something or the other, whether *dharm* or *panth*? It means gutting secularism of its specific content; removing that which makes it distinct from other general principles of democracy. Secularism solely addresses the relation between the state and religion. Secularism demands the separation of religion from the state. It insists that religion must be made a purely personal matter. A secular state should have nothing to do with the religious belief (or non-belief) of a citizen. The state should have nothing to do with religious institutions also; other than the regulatory role it has over all institutions, private or public.

Evidently, the official Indian rendering of secularism has nothing to do with its real meaning. On record, the most it demands is that all religions and their believers must be treated equally. In practice, even this principle is violated, more often than not . The Indian state's bias favouring *savarna* Hindus and persecution of Muslims and other religious minorities have

been repeatedly seen throughout the past decades. This is not an aberration. A common world outlook informs both the gutting of secularism and the *savarna* Hindu bias of the Indian state. They stem from the Brahmanist conception of toleration which privileges itself even while accommodating the 'other'. What is touted as the Indian form of secularism, 'the equal treatment of all religions' is essentially a 'modernised' version of an age-old notion unique to Brahmanism.

The co-existence of religious minorities along with a dominant community is certainly not particular to South Asia. Though interspersed with bouts of persecution, every majority religious community has allowed such co-existence, made necessary by worldly concerns. What is unique to Brahmanism is the space it can allows to other religious faiths within its theological frame itself. This sets it apart from monotheist religions such as the Semitic ones, Buddhism and others. The theologies of these faiths cannot, in principle itself, allow room for any other religion. Their claim to 'godly Truth' rest on their insistence on being the 'Sole Truth'. Brahmanism too insists on being the Sole Truth. But it lodges this claim with a strikingly different logic. This is epitomised in its precept '*ekam sat, vipra bahudha vadanti*'. That is, 'the truth is one, the sages speak of it differently'.

Thus, there may be several 'speakings' or renderings, each different from the other. But all of them reveal one and the same truth. This would also imply that everyone of them are equally legitimate. At a first glance, this rules out privileging any specific 'speaking', including that of Brahmanism. On a closer look, one will see that such eloquent liberalism itself provides Brahmanism with the means to stake claim to superiority. The 'single truth' it projects is nothing other than its own concept of 'ultimate liberation'. While there will be diverse paths to its revelation, what is or needs to be revealed is this concept, Brahmanist to the core. The case of '*unity in diversity*' too, much touted as the essence of the Indian 'national' ethos, is similar. The unity posited here

is not monolithic. It is a unity of diversities. The individualities of the elements producing diversity are apparently recognised. However, by that very act, their distinct separate origins and trajectories are denied. That which individuated them is eliminated. They are thus reduced as mere manifestations of a single element, 'the unity'.

Such theological precepts give Brahmanism remarkable accommodative flexibility. As seen earlier, it is by no means open-ended. Brahmanism too assimilates and dominates—through accommodation. In this it sharply differs from monolithic religions. These religions strive to totally eliminate all features of a pre-existing faith while bringing its believers under their fold. Any trace that remains is given a thorough make-over. The rigidity this gives rise to is all too evident. To given an example, no matter how liberation theology may interpret it, core Christian precepts flatly deny salvation to all those who do not seek it through Jesus Christ. But there is also another side to the matter.

In the process of establishing their singular vision and faith, these religions also impose their values (both spiritual and material) and morality among all those brought under their sway. Quite inadvertently, this can become an enabling factor for the believers. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had drawn attention to this aspect. Very different from this, Brahmanism thrived on what was termed by him as 'graded morality'. This meant differentiated values, beliefs and rituals, even gods. What was granted to the Brahmins was denied to others in increasing degrees, going down the caste order. The denial of its sacred texts to the bulk of those brought under its fold was a hallowed norm. Despite many changes, much of this differentiation remains. Even where they are no longer visible, they persist, particularly through the notion of considering Brahmanist norms as the ideal.

As a corollary, this graded denial was inevitably accompanied by the grant of some space to the beliefs, rituals, deities of the pre-existent faiths, while absorbing their followers as castes.

Elements of those faiths were differentially incorporated within the Brahmanist belief system. Such was its unique mode of proselytisation. It's heterogeneity, ranging from animism to contemplation of a formless, qualityless, abstract Absolute was founded and embellished on this graded allowance. This has also forced it to leave room for the sustenance of non-Brahmanist outlooks and values as living traditions. Drawing on them, powerful anti-Brahminst critiques and movements have come up time and again.

We can now arrive at a proper assessment of the Brahmanist notion of toleration. Accommodation and denial both go together in it. The RSS trumpets its accommodative stance to argue that this makes specific reference to 'secularism' redundant. In its view, Brahmanism has already assured this. Will the demand to go beyond toleration and insist on respect of other faiths suffice as counter to the Sangh Parivar? No. In a manner such 'respect' too can be accommodated in the Brahmanist frame. Allowing space to the 'other' also implies a degree of respect. The late Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, by no means a die-hard, had given an explanation for the range of faiths and rituals existing within the Hindu belief system. He presented it as an adaptation of its lofty principles to the differing intellectual and spiritual levels of its adherents. There is no disrespect for the 'lower' or even 'crude' forms of worship even while the attainment of pure contemplative, spiritual oneness is posed as supreme. Toleration and respect are thus easily accommodated, without yielding a bit on supremacism!

So long as the counter to the RSS is posed in terms of the toleration/respect paradigm, it will remain within the frame of Brahmanism. We will have to be satisfied with a 'more or less' toleration solution; i.e. one of degree rather than substance. The official version of secularism as inscribed in the Constitution and propounded by liberals, the Congress, Socialists and the parliamentary Left, is as much firmly within the Brahmanist frame as that proposed by the RSS. To make a substantial

separation from this, the debate must be focused on the real meaning of secularism and how it can be realised in our context.

To be truly secular, religion must be separated from the state and made a personal matter. Therefore, the accurate translation of 'secularism' in Hindi would be '*dharmether*' or '*nidharmi*'. That is, a state without religion. It has nothing to do with religion. The RSS has argued that such separation is irrelevant in India. Nothing similar to the Catholic Church's domination over royalty in Europe or the explicit and indissoluble link between religion and state power in Islam, ever existed here. Personal communion with an 'Ultimate Truth', without the mediation of temples or priests, was well accepted by Brahmanism. Yes, all of that is true. But it still doesn't settle the matter.

Authoritative texts on state craft, like the 'Arthasasthra' of Kautilya, have clearly put forward the key role of Brahmanism in the state. A Brahmin was a must for royal coronation. A king, in turn, took his crown and throne pledging to protect the cow and the Brahmin ('*go-brahmana pratipalaka*') and prevent the mixing of *varnas*. Islamic influences conveyed through Turk, Mogul and Afghan rule, as well as socio-economic compulsions of the near modern period, made the association of religion and royal power even more pronounced and firm. Thus we see Marthanda Varma, an 18th century Thiruvithamkoor king, 'offer' his kingdom to the deity of Padmanabhasamy temple, declaring that he rules merely as the Lord's servitor. He thereby gave the stamp of supreme, total, divinity to the rule of the Thiruvithamkoor royalty.[63] Evidently, the separation of religion from state is as relevant here as it was in Europe.

Given the diffuse character of the Hindu belief system and Brahmanism's permeation of the state, how can this realised? What exactly will it entail? Since Brahmanism is intrinsic to the ideological make-up of all factions of the ruling classes, one

63 In the process '*sanketams*', centres of absolute Brahmin control, were superseded and the royalty gained control over their lands and temple lands.

cannot realistically expect the realisation of secularism without confronting them. However, even a forceful attempt at secular separation of the state and religion will be truly radical and sustainable only if some specificities are addressed. The specifics of religion and its ties with the state and governance, concretely obtaining here, must be identified and dealt with.

In our caste-ridden society, the religious experience and its social location are quite unlike what exist elsewhere. Whichever may be the religion, the relation of an individual to it in all of its dimensions – belief, rituals, worship and community – is mediated through caste. Whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian or whatever, the believer imbues faith and lives out religion through caste. A Hindu becomes so precisely by being born into a caste.

Ironically, this overwhelming meditation of religion through, and only through, caste was sharply brought into focus during the so-called '*ghar wapsi*' ('return to home') campaign of the Sangh Parivar. Its declared aim is to 'remake' Christians and Muslims as Hindus. The 'reborn Hindus', however, find themselves in a bind. Being in an undefined and undecided caste status they are unable to build communal ties with their newly acquired Hindu brethren! None other than Vinay Katyar, head of the Bajrang Dal, publicly rued that their marriages were proving to be a big problem.

The situation of the Christian, Muslim or Sikh is not exactly identical to that of a Hindu. But, even then, the caste one belongs to has primacy. It is acutely experienced by the Dalit, Adivasi and Backward caste members of these religious communities. The casteist existence of these faiths reveals itself right from differentiated entry and seating in centres of worship to graded positioning in the priesthood's hierarchy.

In Europe, religion had a direct role in state functioning, in governance. Caste has played a similar role in our context. If religion is to be separated from the state and made purely a personal matter, then the personal must first be liberated

from caste. So long as the social existence of the individual is predicated by and through caste, religion can never be made a private affair. Thus, the annihilation of caste acquires a vital role in the secularisation of Indian society. Along with broader issues of democratisation, the anti-Brahmanist struggle has thus a specific relation to the task of achieving true secularism.

During the vigorous debate on secularism in the parliament, most of the speakers were referring to Dr. Ambedkar. The BJP's invention of a Constitutional Day was itself part of the RSS's game plan to construct a Brahmanised version of Ambedkar to serve its fascistic agenda. Yet, not one of its detractors had the sense to counter this with Ambedkar's attack on Brahmanism, to his declared position on the need to dynamite it in order to annihilate caste. But then, given their loyalty to core Brahmanist values, that is their sense.

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To Be in Communion with Our Social Selves

"Religious distress is at the same the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress."

Karl Marx

Globalisation is driving the hunger for material goods and luxurious consumption to extremes. Cheap imitations of costly gadgets and clothes are now widely available. This craze thus engulfs even the poorest sections of society. Status and life's fulfilment are measured by the number of 'latest' 'branded' gadgets and dresses one owns.

Simultaneously, the religious sphere too is thriving. The numbers thronging temples, churches and mosques greatly increase year-by-year. Youth form a large share. Poojas, yagnas, prayer meets, urs, pilgrimage - each and every ritual is multiplying. Apparently, all of this stand in contradiction to the galloping greed for material goods. Yet, in its essence, there is a striking similarity. Religion too is being consumed, much like a commodity. The thrust is on the ostentatious. There is less religiosity and more of glitter and pomp. The grander the better. Religious ceremonies are now 'event managed'. Even the private act of prayer must be embellished with the latest accompaniments — flashy idols, LED lamps, 3D photos and more. This showiness is prominently seen even among those who lay claim to superior

spirituality; a Sri Sri, for example.

Despite this booming, hedonistic, consumption, spiritual and material satisfaction remain out of reach. The more the greed for goods and fervent prayers, the greater the alienation. A dull feeling of lack remains and grows.

Dissatisfied with this state of affairs, an increasing number of people search for real spiritual solace. Often, this leads them to meditation. Meditation and the spirituality it promises is certainly more welcome than the religious commodities being peddled today. At the minimum, it can be a thankful diversion from the crass commercialisation of the spiritual. Even for the non-religious, meditation can give peace of mind, mental relaxation. For the religious minded it offers 'godly bliss'. Neuroscience gives scientific understanding of the brain activity triggered off by meditation and explains its positive outcome. However, even this peace of mind, spiritual solace or religious bliss, is still problematic.

Meditation demands a withdrawal into oneself. This is a precondition, even if it's only for the duration of meditation. Obviously, that cannot be sustained by those who lead an active life. The moment they return to that life they will be assailed by all the conflicts, tensions and needs of their ordinary existence. The state of affairs from which solace was sought through meditation awaits them. For arguments sake, let us assume that an individual who has attained meditative bliss will now be able to face up to this impassively. Even then, the material, social reality that gave rise to tensions and stress remains. All that has been achieved is the mental respite of an individual. Forgetting the contradictions of society, even if everyone were to achieve this state of mind, it would still be the respite of individuals. But the individual can only exist in union and contradiction with society since the human is a social being. Therefore, a sustained spiritual respite, either for an individual or for all, as individuals separately, is an impossibility.

Meditation allows one to attain a state of mind of feeling one with all others, with the world. Neuroscience demonstrates that this emerges from the promotion of activity in a specific region of the brain and the simultaneous muting of activity in another region related to self-reference. However, this state of mind, this sense of communion, would abruptly end the moment that person returns to his or her class, caste, gendered existence. To give an example, a capitalist may be in communion with his workers in the meditative state. But he cannot be so in normal conditions, while remaining a capitalist. To achieve such communion in real life, he must cease to be a capitalist. But that too won't be a solution. So long as that society remains capitalist, this individual ceasing will only lead to the closing down of his factory. The condition of labour of that group of workers will be eliminated. They and their dependents would be thrown into misery. Rather than joining him in communion, they would be cursing their ex-boss.

To sum up, meditation can ease mental stress, grant spiritual bliss and give a sense of communism. But it cannot give a lasting resolution since it avoids addressing the material, social sources of stress and conflict. Besides this, in its Brahmanist version, it also suffers from a basic flaw.

Brahmanism presents meditation as a means for the '*atma*' to become one with *'paramatma*'. It argues that one's ego and desire are obstacles hindering this union. They must be eliminated. Therefore, the process of meditation advanced by Brahmanism is one in which desires are given up. This must finally lead to the elimination of ego itself. In this state of mind there will be no 'I' separate from the '*paramatma*'. The sense of 'I', as a separate entity, will be revealed to be a product of ignorance. The realisation that 'I' is only a part of '*nirgunabrahma*' will be achieved.

For Brahmanism, the ego is a creation of ignorance about the '*atma*' and its indissoluble relation with the '*paramatama*' as a part of it. The ego is seen as the root cause of all emotional,

psychological, spiritual problems. Its elimination is a pre-condition for the attainment of supreme bliss. Meditation is advanced as a means to achieve this. As noted earlier, neuroscience actually does show how meditation causes significant decrease in brain signals from regions associated with self-referential, egoistic thought. But, rather than proving Brahmanism's claims, this scientific knowledge only goes to refute it. At the minimum, it shows that self-referential, ego-centred thought is brain activity. It has a material base. Therefore, it is not an illusion that has emerged from the identification of '*atma*' with the physical body, as explained by Brahmanism.

What if the existence of this specific region in the brain and its activity is itself the product of such illusion? Can't we then assume that not only self-referential brain activity but even the brain region where it takes place can eventually be transformed through meditation?

Science has identified regions in the human brain not seen in other animals. It has shown how they were later growths that came through evolution. Unlike animals, social and cultural practices have played a major role in the further evolution of humans and their brains. Engels' points out the role of labour in this process. As a result of all this, the human brain has evolved into a complex, differentiated organ. Correspondingly, specific brain regions and types of brain activity have emerged, including those related to the ego. Every organism distinguishes itself from everything else, animate or inanimate. If it doesn't do so, material existence, the reproduction and thriving of the species, would be impossible. Self-awareness has its roots in this. The human ego is an advanced type of self-awareness. It is structured and deeply influenced by social existence. It has evolved with the development of human society.

It is evident, then, that the elimination of the ego, as demanded by Brahmanism, is neither possible nor advisable. It is an inseparable part of human existence and consciousness. That

does not mean that we should not concern ourselves with the ego. The human essence is an ensemble of social relations. One's ego too invariably carries the imprint of these relations. In the present world, private property, exploitation and the relations of domination and oppression they give rise to, anchor the ego in selfishness. This definitely is a shackle on social consciousness. It hinders the struggle of radical change. We must address this through developing social awareness and consciousness. A sense of commitment to society, to the people, must be developed in close relation to the struggle to transform the society. This is not elimination of the ego as proposed by the one-sided viewpoint of Brahmanism. It is its transformation. It is the subordination of the self to the larger interests of the people. Selfless service to the people replaces self-seeking.

Controlling the mind through concentration, withdrawing one's consciousness from sensory impulses, is necessary for advancing to the meditative state. However, the matter cannot be simply left at that. Brahmanism conceives lack of mental concentration as a products of the mind's 'fickleness'. The mind is pictured as a monkey on a fruit tree, jumping from branch to branch. Its 'fickle' nature is said to arise from attraction to external objects. To overcome this, one must control and concentrate the mind in order to draw the consciousness away from external objects and sensual desires towards the internal essence, ie the '*atma*'.

Evidently, in this perception, the 'fickle' nature of the mind is simply treated as an altogether negative characteristic to be rid of. Is that correct? If we examine the functioning of our mind we can trace out chains of thoughts. They usually lead us away from what we were thinking of at the beginning. Each thought is linked to the preceding and succeeding ones, somehow or the other. I hear a song. That leads my thoughts to the occasion when I first heard it. This reminds me of a person who was there. I then recollect a novel we were talking about. That brings to memory a character in that novel. I notice some similarities between that

character and the person now sitting near me and so on. I started from a song heard in the past and ended up with the behaviour of somebody in the present.

All of these thoughts were either memories or immediate perceptions. One led to another through something they shared — either a context, outcome or characteristic. Within the brain these associations were made through synapses. A synapse is the connection made between brain cells. The brain has millions of brain cells. Most of them remain unused during the lifetime of an individual. But even the small share in use have the potential for a huge number of synapses. This is the material basis of the mind's 'fickleness', its jumping from one thought to another. For Brahmanism it is simply a negative trait.

On the contrary, this quality of the brain and consequently, of the mind, lies precisely at the very base of human creativity and innovation. It has given humans immense capacity to go beyond perception and conceive of entirely new things. A computer functions with pre-set programmes. Even those with artificial intelligence function within some boundaries. But the human brain has no such limitation, other than its physical one. It can make totally new associations and come up with unique insights. The same objective reality can be subjectively appreciated and represented in diverse forms. The associative capacity of the brain gives us the ability to make abstractions. A large number of particularities can thus be subsumed under a universal category. Ironically, the very quality of the mind damned as negative by Brahmanism has allowed the conceptualisation of its own precepts! To sum up, we must certainly be able to concentrate our minds when required. But this must not be taken up in an absolutist manner, denying the positivity of its roving nature.

Whether ego or mind, in both the cases, Brahmanism projects a one-sided view that originates from its idealism. It is incapable of grasping the material basis of mental phenomena. Though, nowadays, it often tries to 'prove' its claims by drawing

on advances of science, its arguments only serve to contradict itself. Even its highest claim about having the best understanding of spirituality, falls flat.

Marxism does not deny the spiritual side of humans. But it negates views that bracket the spiritual solely with religious belief. This Marxist position is substantiated by neuroscience. Electrical stimulation of a particular region of the brain brings up a state of mind identical to religious/spiritual feelings. The material underpinning of religious spirituality is thus revealed. Simultaneously, we are also educated that the religious experience is something real. It is not mere illusion or a product of ignorance as argued by rationalism. Marxism considers it to be a part of the spiritual mind of humans. Communion with fellow beings, morality, consciousness, the aesthetic sense and the contemplative mind, all of these too are part of the spiritual. It is inseparable from the social existence of human beings. It is not something given, some unique, permanently set human quality, but a product of historical development. The religious experience is only a particular form of expression of the spiritual.

One can surely prepare a long list of the negative fallouts of religious thinking. Yet, it is also undeniable that it has performed two positive roles, right from its origins till now. One was (is) as a moral adjudicator, serving the needs of maintaining, promoting and reproducing social cohesiveness and stability. The other, as a rationaliser, helping to make sense of the contrariness of human existence and its end in death. Thus, it has played a major role in the development, shaping and sustenance of humanity. Yet, it has not remained the same in its content or manner of expression throughout the ages. A very significant, qualitative change took place with the emergence of class society. Various types of social divisions such as class, caste, gender etc., exploitation and private property, shattered the material, social and spiritual communion of humanity.

In primitive societies, the rationalising role of proto-religions

primarily dealt with the nature/human contradictions through worship of nature, animism and ritualistic magic. Forces of nature, animals, trees, mountains and so on were attributed super-human powers and worshipped. The aim was either to mitigate their life threatening powers or draw-out their supposed life-enabling qualities. In their moralistic role these beliefs addressed the needs of stability and cohesiveness of specific tribes vis-a-vis others. Kinships, blood relations, moral codes and so on were defined through totems and taboos.

Unlike this, in class societies, the dual role of religion must address sharp social contradictions. Most fundamentally it must deal with the harsh reality of the increasing aggrandisement of the few at the expense of the vast majority and the oppressions accompanying this. The social communion lost in real life must be recreated as a transcendental union mediated through some omnipotent power named as god, vital force or Brahmanism's *nirgunabrahma*. As Marx noted, it must function as the 'heart' of a 'heartless' world. This is the strength as well as fundamental weakness of religion as a provider of spiritual solace in class society.

Religion certainly does offer solace in a world made inhuman by exploitation and all sorts of oppression. But, the more it does so, the more it becomes a prop, a legitimisation of this inhumanity. In the beginning, a new religion too may be suppressed by the ruling class. But that changes when it gains wider acceptance among the people. The rulers themselves start associating with it and become its believers and patrons. Over time it becomes a consciously sustained tool which helps keep the masses subdued and thus serves the task of maintaining the existent ruling order. Social divisions get replicated within it. It thus suffers an erosion in its capacity to be a salve for despairing minds. The conditions are thus prepared for a new interpretation, a new savant or a new belief system. Its roots lie in the spiritual, theological, philosophical crisis of the extant religion, all of which, in turn, have some very material undercurrents. The new

religion too invariably follows the same path as its predecessors. The 'heartless' world can never really yield space to a 'heart' offering solace.

Idealism always accuses materialism of being concerned only with the physical body, with material desires, of ignoring the spiritual side. However, as seen above, even the religious experience is itself limited in its capacity to address the spiritual. We must go beyond it to satisfy the spiritual needs of human beings.

In his 'Thesis on Feuerbach', Marx criticised mechanical materialist thinking for failing to address the 'active side' of human existence. By this he meant mental activity, the inseparable relation between consciousness and human practice. He pointed out how this lapse has been capitalised by idealism to present itself as the sole representative and proponent of the mental, thinking side. Lenin, in his notes on dialectics, had made a similar observation. He noted how idealism has emerged from material life. It grasped one aspect of reality and then took it up in a one sided manner, thus cutting it off from the flow of life and causing it to shrivel up. Incidentally, this also shows that idealism is not just humbug. It has identified and tried to address a real aspect of human existence, even if it does so in an upside down manner, denying the primacy of matter.

These insights of Marxism help us understand the material base of the spiritual. For members of a primitive tribe, communion was conceivable only with others of the same tribe. Beyond that, no one was even worth consideration as humans. Today, such an attitude would be considered inhuman. Even if only at the conceptual level, all of humankind is now granted the right to a human existence. And this acceptance itself brings out in sharp relief the denial of minimal human conditions for billions of people by a tiny section. That evocative picture of Ayan Kurdi, washed up dead on a beach but bringing to one's mind the playful time he could have spent on it, speaks volumes of the possible

and its cruel denial. The cry of revulsion and anger, the tide of empathy that swelled up, showed us the immense dimensions of spiritual oneness thirsting for expression, as well as the material barriers choking it.

All religions teachers have talked about the power of love. Love for one's fellow human beings is indeed powerful. But, as an African-American saying reminds us "When hunger steps in through the door, love flies out of the windows". There is resignation to the cruel truth of the lives of the poor in these words. There is also pain, bitterness, at the enforced loss of love, of humanness. There is wrath. Should we soothe this spiritual dissatisfaction with mystic retreat into oneself or should we fan it up to energise ourselves in burning anger? We must hit out, hit hard, against the inhuman conditions of the existing world that deny us spiritual satisfaction. We must end this wretchedness. Only then can we proceed towards achieving 'peace of mind', the full blooming of human faculties, material and spiritual, to live as social beings — in communion with our fellow beings, our social selves.

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On Reclaiming our Scientific Heritage

Mythologies of all ancient civilisations have abundant instances of grand flights of human imagination wherein they transcend natural limits and attain supra capabilities. If Rama and Sita flew down from Lanka on a Pushpakviman, the Greek Icarus accompanied his father in self-propelled flight. It is said that he soared around till he got his wax wings melted by getting too close (uppity?) to the Sun. The sheer audacity and poetry of such myths, the thinking of the unthinkable they speak of, is indeed something to marvel about. But, flights of imagination are not science. Citing mythical stories to make claims about our ancestors' scientific acumen, is, simply put, a lot of wind. It would make better sense to stop spinning yarns and get down to the hard work of seeking out the science in our pasts.

From the Vajpaye government onwards, the Rashtriya Sevak Sangh (RSS) and its cohorts have been wasting precious public money in a meaningless quest. They have been trying to track down references, even remotely linkable, to science and technology in the books of antiquity and pin them to one or the other scientific theory. Even a tiny fraction of that effort devoted to a systematic study of our ancient texts would have greatly benefitted us and the whole world by culling out whatever knowledge they contain. As such, that task has been undertaken over the years by a number of historians and scientists, usually attacked by the RSS as less 'Bharatheeya'. They could do so,

because they applied some very modern methodologies, quite 'western' in origin, including that of Marxism.

Thanks to them we are better informed today about the great advances made in the sciences in South Asia. They include weighty contribution in several branches of mathematics, in astronomy, medicine, pharmacology and metallurgy to name a few. These sciences thrived in an atmosphere of lively contention between a number of schools of thought ranging from the materialism of the Carvakas to the absolute monism of Advaida idealism, the dialectics of Jaina and Bauddha schools and the logic of Nyaya. The application of the sciences was seen in many spheres — building observatories to further astronomy, marvels of architecture and construction, plant and livestock breeding, innovative agricultural practices, rocketry, surgical procedures and even rudimentary forms of vaccination. So where and how did we lose this scientific tradition so closely related to practical application?

The Hinduvadis have a stock answer. Not just the RSS but the whole lot of them blame it on 'Muslim invasion'. This, they claim, pushed the region into a 'dark age'. Invasions were certainly destabilising and disruptive. Destruction of great centres of learning such as Nalanda and Taksasila would surely have caused big setbacks in the flow and dissemination of knowledge. Invasions, however, were never the sole prerogative of Afghan, Turk or Mongol marauders or conquerors. The founding of empires, such as the Mauryan or Gupta, their expansion through aggression and forceful assimilation of countless tribal people, were also disruptive of many knowledge systems. Apart from this, some other factors too demand consideration.

In antiquity and the Middle Ages, invasions and conquests were also important means of disseminating and exchanging knowledge and cultural practices. The Arab scientific tradition was well developed by the middle ages during which many of the invasions into South Asia took place. It was carried along with the spread of Islam. Along with devastation and disruption

those invasions must also have given many positive inputs. Furthermore, under the Mughal Empire spanning roughly three centuries, large parts of South Asia were under a single, more or less, stable rule. By the middle of the second millennia, South Asia was one of the most affluent regions of the whole world. Moreover, the Brahmin/Kshatriya elites were forever part of the ruling dispensation, no matter what its religious banner was. That in itself should have been a conduit for the preservation and passing on of previous knowledge. Besides, large parts of the Southern peninsula continued under the traditional *savarna* Hindu kings throughout this period. Finally, there are many recorded instances of Muslim kings' patronage of Sanskrit knowledge. For all these reasons, the sooner we abandon the false assumption of Muslim invasions being the prime reason for the doom of South Asian scientific traditions, the closer we will be to seeking out the actual factors.

The development of the sciences has always and everywhere been closely related to experimentation and practice. This was true of our ancestors too. The Aryabhatta legend in Keralam recounts how that great astronomer and mathematician would lie on the banks of the Nila for nights together, engrossed in star gazing. Caraka and Sushrata, eminent physicians, were reputed to have dug up and dissected bodies to learn human physiology. Caraka is said to have criticised the younger generations for failing to pursue this practice. Bharatha's 'Natya Shastra' is testimony to the efforts he made to collect and collate information about the diverse forms of performing arts from all over the sub-continent. Brothels were sources of information on sex practices for Vatsyayana, author of the 'Kamasutra'. So how was this scientific temperament lost?

These words of Al-Beruni are eloquent, "The Hindu believes that there is no country but theirs, no nation like theirs, no saints like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited and stolid. *They are by nature niggardly in communicating that which they know and they take the greatest possible care to withhold it*

from men of another caste among their own people, still much more, of course, from a foreigner ... Their haughtiness is such that if you will tell them of any science or scholar in Khorasan and Persis, they will think you to be an ignoramus and a liar."[64]

Conceited thinking privileging one's own country above all others was (is) by no means unique to 'Hindus' (most probably he meant Brahmins). But restrictions of caste on the dissemination of knowledge was certainly so. And that supplies the answer to our query. Outweighing everything else, Brahmanism and its caste system were by far the most harmful of all in stunting, dampening and even destroying, the continuous growth of the sciences in South Asia.

Take the case of plastic surgery, the real type (not the idiocy peddled citing the elephant-headed Ganesha). Meeting the demand for reconstruction by those suffering the loss of their noses (a form of punishment in those days) Sushruta developed a simple, but effective procedure. He made a nose shaped incision on the patient's forehead, pulled the skin flap down and shaped a 'new' nose. Sushruta designed a number of instruments for this and other surgical procedures. But, later on, this specialised line of treatment went out of practice and was practically lost for centuries together. It was 'rediscovered' by a British officer. He came across this procedure and the instruments used for it … as practiced by a blacksmith! Evidently, it must have been passed down over the centuries, as part of the manufacture of the instruments. The method, skill and instruments survived as a blacksmith's specialised craft, but by rote. It remained where Sushruta had reached it.

Brahmanism went well beyond all other ruling class ideologies known in world history in the segregation of knowledge and its denial to the oppressed, including women. Its reactionary stance cleaved apart manual and mental labour, causing great harm to the advance of science and technology. The direct

64 Quoted from 'A Farewell to Arms', Alok Sheel, EPW, Vol 51, No 31, Page 117; emphasis added.

sources of empirical knowledge were restricted to the labouring castes. This shrivelled up theory, monopolised by the elite castes. Quite naturally, practice floundered in repetitious ruts, bereft of new theoretical insights drawn from direct experience.

Already shackled by the caste system, what remained of South Asian scientific traditions suffered a deadly blow with colonial conquest and rule. This was the invasion that really caused an irreparable rupture. Colonialism brought the modern sciences and technology to South Asia. But this was not value-neutral. It was stamped by a colonial, racist outlook that dismissed all previous local knowledge as primitive beliefs and superstitions. Colonial contempt for South Asia's scientific tradition was in inverse proportion to extolling its mysticism and Advaida. The one reinforced the other. A firm belief in the superiority of Western thought and science from ancient times onwards was a common basis for both. Scienticism, born of the European Enlightenment, complimented the colonial rubbishing of regional knowledge systems.

How did the South Asian elites respond? There were those who took up the modern sciences. Facing heavy odds and discrimination they succeeded in making major breakthroughs in their respective fields and demonstrated that the South Asian mind is equally capable of scientific brilliance. One recalls with pride Jagadish Chandra Bose and CV Raman, to name a couple, who were among the pioneers. But they were the exceptions.

The *savarna* elite overwhelmingly responded in a typically Brahmanical manner. It almost matched the caustic observation of Al-Beruni, but with a significant difference. Colonialism was constantly tutoring them on the inferior status of their pasts and the present. This was internalised by them as adulation of the Western as the 'modern', as an aspirational model. Yet, that haughtiness, remarked on by Al-Beruni, would be of service. Preening over old glories and 'discovering' the modern sciences in their ancient texts they assuaged their inferiority complex.

Simultaneously, the new sciences were summoned to establish, or explain their philosophical views and religious beliefs. They were 'shown' to have 'scientific' basis. This remains in an unbroken continuity from colonial times, through various shades of Hinduvadis, of Brahmanism, all the way upto the current nonsense dished out by RSS propaganda.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak's 'Gita Rahasya' gives many examples of the methods employed to use the modern sciences in service of the contemporary needs of Brahmanism.There may be more sophisticated pseudo-scientific interpretations of Brahmanic views and rituals. Yet, Tilak's work remains as an authoritative source, given his erudition and systematic exposition. Moreover, as we shall see, some of his arguments still enjoy currency.

Claiming that Kapila's Sankhya philosophy anticipated the modern theory of evolution, Tilak states, "Modern materialist science can say nothing much more than Kapila on how diverse and manifest creation emerged from the unmanifest [*avyakth*] *prakriti*."[65] The Sankhya *prakriti* is one aspect of its primordial duality, the other, being *purusha*. *Prakriti* cannot simply be equated to Nature. Even if we allow such liberties, where has modern science said that all the elements, geological features, flora-fauna and life forms have emerged from a single, unmanifest, primordial matter?

The terminology Tilak employs, 'manifest' and 'unmanifest', is taken from Sankhya and Advaida. They are founded on the belief that every objective phenomenon is already contained in 'potential' in its causes. The emergence of new qualities are ruled out. A usual example given (even today) to justify this is the making of curd from milk. It is argued that the curd was already contained in the milk. The proof offered is the fact that we can't make curd from water since it does not exist in 'potential' there. We surely cannot do that. But that doesn't prove anything. The chemical composition, structure and nutritional qualities of curd

65 Gita Rahasya, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, 26th Marathi Edition, Pune, 2015; pp 91-92; square brackets added.

were not pre-existent as an 'unmanifest' in milk, its constituents or the bacteria causing curding. This is a new, emergent quality. Sankhya and Advaida refuse to accept it.

Tilak further argues, "Modern physics too has affirmed that no matter how much any substance undergoes change, the total of mass and *karmashakti* [energy] will remain the same".[66] This is cited as proof of the truth in Sankhya's denial of new qualities. Mass can be converted to energy and vice versa. But that only speaks to the quantitative aspect. The law of conservation of energy and mass has nothing to say about new, emergent qualities. Modern physics, chemistry, botany and zoology teach us countless instances of new qualities emerging.

Asserting that modern physics has arrived at the view that everything, including the elements, have emerged from one, single, matter, Tilak equates this to the Sankhya *prakriti* with its three *gunas* (qualities). By the time he was publishing his work in 1915, modern atomic sciences had already gone beyond concepts of some single primordial atom as the single basic building block. But he preferred to ignore such advances, or rather, he was blind to them. Tilak was not wilfully misrepresenting them. His arguments came from a deep conviction, whose roots lie in the absolute monism of Advaida. Let us examine the logic of this world view.

Adi Sankara's example of the snake and rope, cited to establish Advaida's key concepts of the ultimate real, (*nirgunabrahma*) and the unrealness (*maya*) of the material universe is a good place to start from. He equates the illusion of *maya*, said to be caused by ignorance of the all prevailing oneness of *nirgunabrahma*, to someone mistaking a rope for a snake. Notice that his conclusion does not logically flow from the comparison he makes. Rather, the example itself constitutes the logic. It conveys the sense he argues for precisely because the equation is made between objects similar to each other and familiar to the observer. Substitute any other dissimilar, unknown pair and the whole argument

66 ibid, p 93.

will fall flat.

Advaida does not reject outright the existence of a universe, one external to the observer. It asserts that the visible universe is *maya* (unreal) as opposed to the *nirgunabrahma* . The reasoning given is that the latter is an indestructible, undifferentiated essence which lies beneath the universe of objects with name and form while the former is transient.[67] Advaida accepts that objects external to the observers are the foundation of all knowledge about them rising in their minds. However, it argues that there is yet another independent thing external to the observer that underlies them. This is the *nirgunabrahma*.[68] It is 'eternal and true'. It can never be sensed, but can only be realised by gaining knowledge of the unity of the *atma* and *nirgunabrahma*. The visible universe is actually 'unreal' *maya*. Thus, the acceptance of an external world of objects becomes a formal gesture, literally devoid of any substance. The monism it argues for, the '*unity in diversity*' it speaks of, is not derived, abstracted, from independently existing diverse material phenomena. It is attributed. In fact, this is the real *adhyaropa* (superimposition) executed by Advaida, not the one caused by the '*maya*' it posits.

The logic of Advaida draws a distinction between '*jnana*' (awareness) and '*vijnana*' (science). The former rates above the latter. It is the knowledge coming from the awareness that "... there is a singular, unmanifest, primordial substance within the numerous (diverse) manifest objects ..." seen in the sensuous universe. *Vijnana* is the understanding of how "each one of the different, multiple, manifest objects were created from the singular primordial, unmanifest, substance.[69]

This sets up an unsurpassable barrier in the study of material phenomena. Rather than guiding that study towards grasping the essence underlying appearance, it forces it to remain at a

67 Ibid, pp 132-133.
68 Ibid, p 134.
69 ibid, p102. This is based on sloka 13.30 and 18.20 of the Gita given in pages 501 and 503 of the Gita Rahasya.

superficial level. It insists on a pre-existing unity among all phenomena which is to be discovered. Inevitably this ends up in imposing preconceived notions or qualities and inverts the process of conceptualisation. All of these aberrations emerge from Advaida's false determination between a 'really real' *nirgunabrahma*, the immutable essence, and the 'unreally real', ie. the sensuous universe.

The disastrous consequences of this logic is seen in Tilak's attempt to 'prove' a unity underlying diversity and human capacity to gain awareness about it. A comparison is made of the difference between an animal's and human's comprehension of the same phenomena. The example given is that of telling time from the tolling of a bell. Tilak argues "Even if an animal has awareness of several [sensory] impressions it does not achieve a realisation of the unity in diversity",[70] ie. the totality of these sounds indicating time. Quite true. But leave alone animals, even a human does not tell time, conceiving it as a 'unity' contained in the 'diversity' of separate sounds. 12 strokes of a bell are taken as indicating 12 o'clock in an associative context passed on through culture. In societies that have not arrived at such a denomination of time, it would only be understood as a grouping of a particular sound. Even in cultures where the tolling of a bell is used as a method of conveying time, in a different context, say a sound lab, it would only be taken as a batch of sound samples. In all these cases, the meaning comes from 'conceptualisation', not as the manifestation of some unity 'inherent' to the tolling of a bell.

Posing a rhetorical question, of how humans can live if only the manifest (*vyakt*) is accepted, Tilak goes on to argue, "True, the particular object, mango and rose plant are visible. But the common noun plant does not show any visible or manifest object and all of our [practical] conduct goes on like this. It is clear from this that some or the other manifest object must be there before our eyes in order for our minds to be conscious of

70 ibid p.80.

any idea of some unmanifest. But the manifest itself not being the final step, we cannot take even a step forward without relying on the unmanifest nor can we complete even a sentence."[71]

The terms 'manifest' and 'unmanifest' are already coloured by the preconceived notion of something lurking behind or below objective reality. If we keep aside this loaded terminology, the matter discussed by Tilak concerns the relation between the particular and the general (universal). The general resides in the particular; that is, the notion of general is derived from numerous, particular, objects. In this case they are the various species of plants. The particular, in turn, is contained (represented) in the general. The essential commonness shared by this category of objects is captured, expressed, by the general — in this case the common noun 'plant'. Tilak accepts the former only to flip it over and end up with an unfounded attribution or assertion that the particular cannot even exist without the general. The dialectics of the material, concrete reality and its abstraction in concepts or categories, a key foundation of sciences, is thus brutally violated by the arbitrary imposition of Advaida.

If this is how the use of thought categories ends up choking off scientific thinking, one need not be surprised to see science itself being declared as 'a matter of faith'. The example Tilak gives is that of sun rise. Since it has been observed to regularly happen in the morning it is considered that this will go on. Apparently the knowledge seems to be beyond doubt. But, Tilak argues, a closer look will show that the mere fact of your (or your ancestors) seeing sunrise every morning is no reason for its repetition tomorrow. The sun neither rises because you have seen it do so till today, nor does it do so for you to see it. The reason underlying sunrise is something else.

He goes on to conclude, "After realising that the order of something is, without fail, the same over a long period of time, to believe that it will remain so forever in the future too is a form of

71 ibid, p 304; emphasis and words in brackets added.

faith. Even if we qualify this with a big sounding word 'deduction', this deduction is not of the nature of knowable cause-effect but is essentially a matter of faith."[72]

Observation, no matter how prolonged, cannot be a reason. But when a phenomenon repeats itself we can draw some inference from our observations. If they get verified through experimentation then we can formulate a law. We can define the observed phenomenon independent of the observer. We see 'sunrises' in the East, every morning, because the earth revolves around its axis. So long as this cause remains, the effect characterised by us as 'sunrise' will continue, regardless of our faith.

What stands out throughout Tilak's attempt to give a 'scientific' visage to Brahmanism's world view and logic is his denial of the primacy of matter in motion. Proceeding from his idealist premises, he has given an explanation of the scientific method. It is declared to be a matter of showing (through a process of logical arguments that considers the pros and cons) how the basic principles of the issue under examination can be derived from things (positions) naturally understood by all. Geometry is summoned as a model of this method to assert that the logic seen in the 'Vedanatsutra' is scientific.[73] Euclid's geometry proceeds from axioms. But they are grounded in observations of material reality. Tilak, following Advaida, starts from and remains, in his mental constructs.

Advaida's idealist, absolute monism blocks scientific enquiry. Not just Brahmanism's caste system, its very logic, world view, philosophy, have played a major role in the throttling of South Asia's scientific traditions. It continues to do so, insidiously promoting itself, while taking refuge in pseudoscience. In the present age even the most reactionary, repressive, thinking must clothe itself in the garb of science.

Some may question this conclusion by pointing to the

72 ibid, p 248.
73 ibid, p 269.

advances in science made in the past by people who were Brahminist in their thinking. The example could be given of Sushruta himself, the eminent surgeon and physician. His 'Sushruta Samhita' unapologetically reproduces and applies *varna* biases in categorising body types and setting out regimes of treatment. Even so, such warped views were not unique to South Asia. One can count any number of modern day scientists who simultaneously subscribe to idealism, and even the fallacies of religion. Yet, it remains a fact that their contribution to the sciences were not born of their idealism. It came from being materialist in their practice of science. The same was true of Sushruta. The variety of surgical procedures he developed came from a materialist knowledge of the human body. They did not flow from any faith he may have had on the *nirgunabrahma* and *chathurvarna*.

Breaking away from the slavish mind-set that make us disparage our own past, a mental condition instilled by colonialism and fostered under neo-colonialism, is a prime condition for any endeavour to regain our great scientific traditions. Along with that, we must also confront and root out Brahmanism and its worldview, which prefer to revel in hollow claims and unfounded assertions. The imperialist, scienticist world view, and that of Brahmanism share common ground in sneering at the knowledge of the people, of those who are a major source of direct, empirical, knowledge. For imperialism all science is European in its origins. Every other knowledge system was (and is) dismissed as primitive, seriously lacking in scientific spirit and methods. For Brahmanism, all ancient knowledge, whether in the sciences or arts, were the benevolent boons of its gods. It keeps pace with imperialism in scorning local knowledge systems and practices.

Making the old serve the new, imbibing the best in modern sciences, we must reclaim and build on our scientific heritage. We must do so always keeping in mind that the generation of knowledge in any region of the world never took place in

isolation. It has always gained from external influences, while contributing to the common pool of human knowledge. We, in South Asia, should take pride in the scientific achievements seen in our common heritage. Not in meaningless competition staking claim to being the first, but to remind us of what was achieved, what can be done and what remains to be done.

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Probing Nishkamakarma

'*Nishkamakarama*' is a key precept of Brahmanism. It can be explained as 'doing one's duty without seeking its benefit'. That, of course, doesn't mean being unconcerned about the outcome. Duty must be done to the best of one's ability with the aim of getting results. But it must be done without desire for personal gain. This is the message conveyed by '*nishkamakarma*'. It is projected as a glowing sample of Brahmanism's lofty, noble, ideal of selfless service.

Doing duty without seeking personal gain is certainly selfless service. No one would deny that. Yet, is that all there is to be said about the precept? *Karma*, in Brahamanic ideology, is not simply duty. It was firmly entrenched in the *varna* structure and, later, in the structures of the caste system. The sense of duty it conveyed was pre-prescribed for the different *varnas*. In the caste system it means caste duty. The Shudras of the *varna* system were duty bound to serve the other *varnas* through their labour. That was their *karma*. Expounding '*karmayoga*' the 'Bhagavad Geeta' exhorts, "...the knowing person should carry out the *karma* determined by *chathurvarna* without love for its result".[74]

Justifying the *varna*-bound ordering of duty in his 'Geetha Rahasya', Tilak points to the havoc that would be caused in a society based on *chathurvarna* if the *varnas* failed to fulfil their respective duties.[75] No doubt, that would certainly have happened. However, it is equally certain that this would have

74 'Geeta Rahasya' (GR), Bal Gangadhar Tilak, 26th Marathi Edition 2015, p 186.
75 Ibid, p 40.

been quite welcome to the Shudras, condemned to drudgery by that social system. For the Shudra, '*nishkamakarma*' could never have been an attractive proposition. The same was (and is) the case for the Dalits and other oppressed labouring castes in a caste society.

Apart from its casteist structuring, the duty signified by *karma* has another basic flaw. It is devoid of all human agency. *Karma* is an inseparable link in Brahmanism's theory of the birth-death cycle (*bhavachakra*). Eternal escape from this cycle constitutes '*moksha*' (liberation of the soul). This is posed as the highest attainment. But its achievement depends on fulfilling one's *karma*. The deeds of one's life add up as positive or negative *karma*. When the former outweighs the latter, there is the reward of heaven or a 'higher' birth in reincarnation. When negative *karma* dominates, the retribution of hell or 'lower' birth follows. One part of accumulated *karma* is worked out during the course of the reborn life. The remaining part gets carried over to the next rebirth. So long as one's *karma* remains, *moksha* is unattainable. In other words, the working out of one's *karma*, the duty done as part of this, is preordained. There is no conscious self-willed application in 'doing one's duty' as instructed by '*nishkamakarma*'.

The objection may be raised that the conscious effort that can be made to break the *karmic* cycle and attain *moksha* has been ignored. Yes, Brahmanism does allow this. But the *karma* that can thus be eliminated is strictly limited to the 'yet to be carried out' part. That part of *karma* which is already being carried out in the current birth remains. Even if an individual attains realisation of the oneness of '*atma*' (soul) and '*paramatma*' (The Absolute), this law of *karmavipakam* (*karmic* outcome) remains unchanged. Hence, the space for conscious intervention is quite limited. Within that narrow allowance too it remains 'bound by *karma*'. Moreover, even that limited conscious effort is considered by Brahmanism to originate from the agency of the *atma*, not of human consciousness.

Such is the condition of *karma*. *What* about the '*nishkama*'

(without self interest) part of the precept? We saw that the duty enjoined by *karma* is pre-ordained. It cannot be determined through conscious choice. By logical extension, the sacrificing of self-interest too cannot be a matter of choice. This is well explained by Tilak's exposition of the famous Geeta sloka, "... *karmanye vaathikarasthe ma phaleshu kadhachana ...*"[76] Tilak points out that Krishna explicitly rules out any right to *karma's* fruits (outcome) even while enjoining Arjuna to fulfil his *karma*. Because, "obtaining or not obtaining the fruit of *karma* is a matter that does not come under your control but of that of supreme god or of your accumulated *karma*... Therefore, don't do any duty with the expectation of enjoying its outcome. Whatever was pre-ordained by accumulated *karma* will happen. You can neither will its increase not its decrease. Nor can you will it to happen sooner or later. Hence, to desire the outcome is a futile exercise that will only yield sorrow".[77]

In sum, the 'selfless duty' propounded by Brahmanism is really a matter of the self being excluded from any conscious role. This exclusion is equally applicable in the so-called renunciation of any interest in the fruits of one's labour. It is termed so-called because though it may seem that such renunciation is a conscious decision informed by awareness of *karmic* duty, in actual fact that is not true. Going by the logic of Brahmanism's '*nishkamakarma*' that decision too must be pre-ordained, conditioned by accumulated *karma.*

The Communist principle of 'selfless service for the people' stands in direct opposition to Brahmanism's '*nishkamakarma*'. Communist selfless service is guided by the spirit of self-sacrifice. It is carried out through participation in class struggle. All of these are completely conscious acts.

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76 Geeta: 2.47; GR, p 386.
77 GR, p 69.

Of Bharatheeyata and Malayalitham

To give a very rough rendering of a Vallathol verse — "One's heart must swell up with pride on hearing of Bharatham. One must get roused up on hearing of Keralam".[78] I wonder how that would square up with the cultural nationalism stridently promoted by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Which culture must one privilege and why? Would it be 'anti-national' to even conceive of a Malayalee nationality, let alone take pride in it? These then are some of the questions that come to mind when confronted by the diehard postures of cultural nationalism. The complex pair of Bharatheeyata and Malayalitham (substitutable by any other – Telugu, Bengali, Gujarati...) lies at their centre.

The notion of cultural nationalism or nationhood defined by culture is by no means unique to India. Well before gaining adherents here, it was the dominant theme of Austrian Social Democracy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They were driven by their quest to assuage national stirrings of various people held within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, they desired to do this without ceding to demands for self-determination and secession. Instead, 'cultural autonomy' was proposed as the solution. This would allow the different peoples the right to schooling in their own languages and a host of other cultural rights. Evidently, in that instance, the notion of cultural nationalism was employed to record national distinction without disturbing the territorial integrity of a unitary state. Over here, it is being heralded to dissolve all such national distinctions into a single, all embracing nationhood. This is posed as something standing above territorial boundaries, even preceding them.

78 Vallathol Narayana Menon was a renowned Malayalam poet of the early 20th century.

For Rabindranath Tagore, there was an 'India' since antiquity, even though not as a nation in the modern sense. Its uniqueness is supposed to have been in "... (B)uilding bridges across ethnic and religious diversity". "Bharatvarsha has endeavoured to tie-up diversities in a relationship limiting the conflict between opposing and competing elements in a society by keeping them separate and at the same time engaged in a common task that brought diverse elements together". In this "endeavour", society, its structures and functioning, were considered to have played the role of the unifying factor. "In India, regardless of changes in the state systems, for centuries society had guided and protected people's way of life and provided continuity, till British rule intervened."[79] The Brahmanist theme of '*unity in diversity*' resounds loud and clear in this barely veiled extolling of its caste system, its values and life principles as 'the way of life'.

Coming to the present, Sheshrao More, the Marathi historian writes " Though Bharat was not a nation in that sense in which we today speak of a 'nation', culturally it was one from antiquity itself..." ; "We got the impetus to form a nation due to British rule... In that sense British rule was a blessing in disguise for Bharath. Of course, the feeling of one nationality could emerge in Bharath because of its essential cultural unity and Bharath could become a single nation".[80] More insists on distancing his 'cultural nationalism' from that of the 'Right', presumably meaning the RSS and its cohorts. He declares "Even though they call it cultural nationalism, its sense is that of religious nationalism".[81] Yet, quite ironically, when it comes to expounding what he considers to be the foundations of 'Bharath's cultural unity' More himself falls back on religion. He argues, "This method of uniting by attaching sacredness to various places in the country or the creation of

79 As quoted in 'Antinomies of Nationalism and Rabindranath Tagore', Sabyasachi Bhattacharaya, EPW Vol 51, No: 6.

80 'Bharath Rashtr Hoteka?', Sheshrao More, Lok Satta, (translated from Marathi)

81 'Bharathiyatachya shodh ghyalach hava', S. More, Lok Satta, January 6, 2016.

new holy spots was the third principle of Bharatheeya cultural unity." Such a method "... was advanced from time to time, quite consciously, so that all Bharatheeyas would consider each part of Bharath as their own, so that they would have reverence and affection towards them".[82] A few simple questions, like who did this "attaching sacredness" or went about "picking holy spots", readily brings out the Brahmanism inherent to More's vision of cultural nationalism.

This is not surprising. However the case is argued for cultural nationalism or cultural unity as the core of Bharatheeyatha, one will inevitably end up with one or another version of Brahmanism. It may be argued that one's views on Brahmanism cannot be made the criteria to evaluate the actual role it played and its outcome. Yes, that must be assessed from facts. And they do testify to the role it has played in creating a broad cultural frame through its views and practices of social ordering such as caste, its unique theology and religious motifs. The questions that still remain are about how common, how united this was; its extent and how much it can be taken to signify a nation.

Leaving out all other facets, take a close look at the religious aspect of the declared cultural unity. Is there (or was there) a single or common 'Hindu' way of life, worship or culture?[83] The answer is a loud no. This was (and is) true of even those considered as the 'keepers of faith', the Brahmins. To begin with, there was no such single 'Brahmin' caste. What really existed (and exists) is the Namboodiri, Aiyar, Gouda Saraswat, Chitpavan, Kashmiri Pandit and many more specific castes, broadly categorised/ considered Brahmin. While these castes do have a lot in common in religious customs and rituals, all of them also maintain many distinctions amongst themselves in these matters. They even vary in their diets, some being meat or fish eaters.

82 'Dharmikkalpanathun sanskritik aikye', S. More, Lok Satta, April 27, 2016.

83 The term 'Hindu', denoting the totality of belief systems broadly adhering to Brahmanist theology came into wide usage during the colonial period.

Such diversity is equally true of the Hindu communities in different parts of the sub-continent. Their rituals, festivals, diets and even calendars display great variety. Holi and Rakshabandhan were, till recently, never part of the Malayalee Hindu's lives. To give another example, 'Karkidakam' (roughly July 15 to August 15), is the last month of 'Kollavarsham', the Malayalee calendar. This is the 'bad' month in popular imagination. On the last day of this month, Hindus (and many s*avarna* Christians) follow the ritual of sweeping out the old in order to usher in the New Year. Meanwhile, going by the Saka calendar followed in Maharashtra, the second half of Karkkidakam coincides with the first half of Sravan. Sravan is considered by the Marathis to be a very auspicious month, observed with many rituals and fasting. We thus have a roughly identical period of time valued and observed in totally contrary ways. While Brahmanist theology cannot explain this, climate can. Karkkidakam marks the thunderous crescendo of the South West monsoon in Keralam. Heavy and continuous rains literally shut up people in their houses. It thus became a month of dire poverty and hardship. The Malayalees had every reason to consider it bad, inauspicious. Apart from such natural factors, customs, beliefs and rituals carried over from earlier tribal times or from previous religions (Buddhism or Jainism) and a host of other elements have joined up in making the Hindu communities so diverse.

So what about the 'cultural unity'? Does the existence of multiple ways of life, ritual and worship among the Hindus themselves negate it? My answer would be a yes and no. The irrefutable evidence of striking differences emergent from the particularities of their pre-Brahminic past and geography certainly rules out 'unity' in the sense advocates of a single, overarching Bharatheeya culture claim. Yet, along with that, numerous elements of commonness are also seen, right amidst diversities. They, however, are not restricted to a Bharath — either in the sense of the present Republic of India or an assumed historic land, Bharatvarsha. It is South Asian. Irrespective of

their religion, the peoples of South Asian countries (countries in the South Asian sub-continent) have much in common in their cultures and ways of life. This is equally true for both Hinduism and Islam, the two major religions of this region. Just like the Hindus, the Muslims of all South Asian countries too have more in common among themselves as compared to co-religionists in other regions of the world. This is not explained by centuries of centralised Mughal rule. Such commonness is seen even in the extreme South that was never within the Mughal empire. All of this permits us to speak of several traits common to South Asian countries. But that doesn't make for 'cultural unity', indicating a nation.

There is nothing unique about this commonness. It can be seen in other regions of the world too. Western Europe is an example. A great deal of similarities in life styles, values, cultures, dietary habits, and attire, in fact, far more than in South Asia, exist there. Yet, given the various nations (French, Spanish, German etc.) and their robust cultures, no one in their right senses would argue for a European 'cultural nationalism' or 'cultural unity'. The European Union was assumed by some to be a passage towards transcending these nations and advancing to a "Europeanhood". Brexit and the national passions it has stirred up *within* some European countries should be sufficient refutation of that prospect.

Bharath/India is quite deviously portrayed by the modern proponents of Brahmanism as a core continuity from Bharatvarsha. The mythical Bharatvarasha has been described variously. Consider the one seen in the Mahabharat. Even if its account is taken literally, the forces arrayed for battle as described in it were never considered to be part of a single country or empire. If Bharatvarsha is taken as a broad geographical-cultural region, instead of being a country, one must then admit that its Western and Eastern extremities took off on very different social, cultural trajectories, centuries ago. At present, there is very little they hold in common, in cultural terms, with South Asian countries.

We must further qualify South Asia by excluding most of the ethnic peoples of India's North-Eastern states. They have more in common with their South-East Asian neighbours. Bharath/India simply cannot be derived from Bharatvarsha. As for the 'Akhand Bharath' of the RSS and its offshoots, it is nothing more than a colonial hangover, a claim on British India and vassal kingdoms. Quite symbolically they choose to commemorate August 14, the date of the 1947 Partition, as their Akhand Bharath day. There could not be no better proof of the colonial parentage of 'Akhand Bharat'. Their map of the imagined land includes both Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Yet, the logical step of selecting the dates of their separation from British India was not preferred for obviously communal reasons.

To go back to Bharatheeyata and Malayalitham, how exactly do they relate to each other? Is this relation captured by the concept of '*unity in diversity*'? Should the Malayalee culture be considered as a sub-culture, a sub-narrative, a particular expression of Bharatheeyata? That precisely is what is claimed by the dominant Brahmanist narrative. Categorising cultural traditions as Margi and Desi (the former being Bharatheeyata, superior to the latter), qualifying national languages as vernacular or regional as opposed to Sanskrit which is accorded the status of 'mother language' – there are any number of examples. This Brahmanist narrative is by no means limited to the Sangh Parivar. All sections of the ruling classes share it. Even those within the progressive camp have internalised it.

Sample this quote, "In providing thick narratives, studies of regions offer the possibilities of unsettling the grand narratives. Nevertheless, integrating these studies to recover the patterns of our *cultural pasts* should be fruitful in so far as they will be perspectives from below, factoring in the variegated *flavours of India*. *The cultural unity of India* represented in a pool of common ideas, values, symbols and motifs was not naturally inherent or inherited, but derived from the intra and inter-regional cultural transactions, which shaped the formation of these regions

during the early medieval period and beyond. So it emerges that regions are a part of the whole and not the whole itself. They are, in fact, an *intermediary category* between the trans-regional and the local, the latter known to us by terms such as Janapada and Nadu in North and South India respectively. While regions shape and are continuously reshaped by transregional/ pan-Indian cultural strands, the sense of shared traditions engendering the experiences of belonging to a felt community in a spatially distinguishable and culturally identifiable entity evolves historically."[84]

The tension of ambivalence is all too palpable. There is the acknowledgement of our cultural *pasts*, i.e. not one but several cultures. And, then, there is the astonishing reversal where all of them are shepherded into being simply "flavours *of* India" (not *in* India). The logical conclusion follows: submerging of the initial premise of several cultures in the official shibboleth of 'cultural unity of India'. However, the contradictions stick out. Amends are now sought by accepting the role of the 'regions' in giving form to the declared 'cultural unity of India', which is admitted to be a derivative. This is, of course, a welcome break from the Brahmanist grand narrative which insists on the unilateral, top down 'naturally inherent' or 'god-given' nature of its claimed 'cultural unity', its Bharatheeyata. But Saha quickly give up his oppositional stance. Declaring 'regions' to be 'part of the whole', mere 'intermediaries' in the transition to the 'whole', the dominant narrative of Bharatheeya nationhood is placated. How should one understand these swings of logic? Perplexity in accounting for cultural commonness in the midst of the multinational character of present India? Or shying away, for political reasons, from squarely accepting our multi-cultural, multi-national pasts and present?

Let us keep aside the reality of our multinational existence for the time being and examine our equally real cultural

84 'Writing Alternate Histories', Bhairabi Prasad Saha, EPW, Vol 51, No 18. Italics added

commonness. In the quote we just saw, this commonness (mistakenly portrayed as 'unity') was expressed as a derivative from below. Brahmanist narratives present it as just the opposite – flowing from above and shaping those below. The actual dynamics arose from neither of them separately but through the interplay of both. More than inter and intra-regional 'cultural' transactions, interactions between the ideas, values, symbols and motifs of the dominating, subjugating, Brahmanical ruling orders and those of the subjugated and assimilated tribal peoples were determinant. In the South, Buddhism and Jainism preceded Brahmanism as ruling ideologies. Though Buddhist, Jaina and Islamic influences went into the evolution of the commonness in customs, culture and values etc. seen here, the principal one was that of Brahmanism.

The shaping up of regionally specific caste structures as part of emergent caste-feudal social formations and the marking out of distinct cultural regions with their specific languages were two major historical transitions towards the evolution of nationalities in the sub-continent. Regional specificities ensuring unique identities had tribal roots. Their systematisation into social structures, further promoting the growth and spread of distinct cultures, ways of life and languages, were greatly influenced and ordered by impulses of Brahmanism. But all of this only provided the potential. In most parts of the sub-continent, the actual leap to nationalities, national languages and cultures came through the Bhakti movements. Coming from below they were either openly anti-Brahmanic or, at the very least, striving to reform it. However, this process was not taken forward to the formation of nations. National cultures remained mediated through caste and religion. And that continues.

The dialectic of the local/tribal and the Brahmanic generated both the national bases and the elements of cultural commonness seen in our country. It is this dialectic that explains their paired presence even in regions of the country, which had never been under a single ruler, throughout centuries, till the British rule. Not

just national distinctions, Brahmanism itself was shaped through this dynamics. Its very conceptualisation of Bharatheeyata, as it came to be fleshed out through the Middle Ages, has been shaped by the diverse regional/ethnic influences it interacted with while spreading and tightening its grip over the sub-continent. This can be seen over a whole range. The appropriation of sacred spots, tribal rituals and deities, advances made in science and of the aesthetic are some examples. As could be expected of any superseding ideology, Brahmanism claims each and every one of them as creations of its gods or blessings given by them. That remains the dominant theme in official-speak.

This then is the rough outline of the actual emergence of national cultures and cultural commonness in the sub-continent. Yet, it needs to be complemented by the observation that there was nothing inevitable about their trajectories leading to the present. The appropriation of the historically formed cultural commonness as a single Bharatheeyata/Indianness too was not foregone. Several chance factors, most importantly British rule, have gone into its making. Colonialism unified diverse nationalities and far flung regions under a centralised rule. For the first time in history, this covered the whole sub-continent. A material basis allowing the imagining of an Indian nation emerged. Tutoring of elites of the nationalities/cultural regions in the coloniser's language and culture and the weakening of social ranking among them permitted a new type of inter-communication and shared values. Their voices and agencies, informed by European Enlightenment filtered through colonial modernity, evoked an 'Indian nation'.

The arbitrariness of its outcome resides in the fact that there was nothing inevitable about unified British Rule. One can very well conceive different scenarios. If the British had to found their match in the French, there may have been two colonies with distinctly different political, cultural trajectories, and consequently, imaginings. A situation where all colonial powers had exhausted themselves in the European wars would

have permitted the various kingdoms in the sub-continent (the Maratha, Sikh, Mysore) to vie for supremacy. The outcomes, and imaginings, in that case would have been anything but Bharatheeya! Given that the formation of modern India as a single country was only one among several possibilities, the fictitious nature of views that will found a Bharat/Indian nation on some age-old cultural unity is all too evident.

Brahmanism's claims of a Bharathvarsha spanning the sub-continent and beyond actually gained a new life through British India. Simultaneously, through providing a sense of ancient origins, Brahmanism made it possible to conceive this construct of colonial modernity as the resurgence of a held back past glory. It thus contributed in a massive way to the concealment of the foreign, dependent foundations of 'Indian/Bharatheeya nationhood' in the inverted reality conveyed through the false consciousness of Indian nationalism. The anti-colonial struggle dominated by the Indian National Congress became the means to shape up/work out this ideological instrument. It was the main agency subverting the anti-imperialism of the masses. It drew them into a hegemonic consensus which would provide legitimacy to the future Indian State.

Well before coming into power, the present ruling classes made sustained efforts to replace the real nationalities, real nationalisms (Tamil, Maratha and so on) with an Indian/Bharatheeya nation and nationalism. They failed. Over the course of the anti-British struggle a complex intertwining of Indianness and Malayalee (or some other) national identity, the simultaneous strengthening of both, took place. The former mainly captured minds as a sense of unity against the foreign coloniser. The later flourished as the rooted, living reality of the people. Partition fractured some nationalities – physically in the case of the Punjabi and Bengali, socially and psychologically in the case of the Sindhis. It later led to the division of Kashmir. But, for the Bharatheeya/Indian identity, Partition's negativity was an enabling factor. It continues to be so with Pakistan as the

permanent enemy, the 'other'.

Following the establishment of the Indian State in 1947, the new ruling classes tried even more to consolidate an Indian/ Bharatheeya identity. In order to weaken and possibly even eliminate national identities they retained the provisional boundaries left over by the colonial administration. The British had formed these provinces, arbitrarily splitting-off and clubbing parts of several nationalities. The Bombay province, for example, contained Gujarati, Marathi, and Kannadiga populated tracts. Various national people stiffly opposed the devious plan of the new rulers, ostensibly posed as maintaining administrative continuity. Their struggles finally led to the formal acceptance and physical delineation of national territories in 1956. The whole exercise was deviously termed 'linguistic reorganisation of states', quite purposefully avoiding all mention of nationalities. Even for this, the Marathis and Punjabis had to bitterly fight on for several more years. Reorganisation still remains incomplete.

Meanwhile, the rulers have continuously tried to strengthen Bharatheeya/Indian identity at the expense of national identities. Hindi is promoted as the national language despite there being no such consideration in the Constitution. The 'national' is reserved for Bharath/India, while the actual nationalities are only permitted a 'regional' epithet. Over the past few decades, North Indian Vaishnavaite Hindu customs and rituals are being presented and promoted as the authentic 'Indian' culture and way of life. So what have they finally achieved? Not much. A few months back Marathi newspapers reported that Raj Thackeray, leader of the Maharashtra Nava Nirman Sena, had drawn attention to the different cultures and languages present in India. A staunch Hinduvadi, the occasion he chose to make this observation was quite revealing – he was commenting on the Brexit vote and its fallout.

Indian nationalism is key to the legitimisation of the comprador-bureaucrat bourgeoisie/feudal lords rule. Functioning

as 'false consciousness', it conceals our dependent reality and conveys an image of independence. Externally it serves the expansionist interests of the Indian State. Internally it legitimises the suppression of nationalities and ethnic identities. The only possible expression of Indianness with positive, progressive, content is as patriotism directed against imperialism. However, this is again quite complex and problematic.

One type of Indian/Bharatheeya identity is the one grounded among the urban, English educated *savarna*, upper middle class. They are increasingly getting integrated as a homogeneous social group through inter-national and inter-*savarna* caste marriages. Succeeding generations are more Indian than nationality rooted. But their cultural milieu is predominantly comprador. English is mother tongue for them. Aspirational role models, individually, as well as for the country, are firmly anchored in the West. There is also, simultaneously, a strong undercurrent of caste-feudal values parading as their Indianness. This is manifested, on the one hand, as *savarna* antagonism towards the Dalits, Adivasis and intermediary castes (OBCs) whom they ridicule as the 'reservation-walas'. On the other hand, it is seen in their increasing identification with Brahmanic Hindu revivalism, politically, as well as in individual religio-cultural practices. There has also been a corresponding strengthening of anti-Muslim attitudes among them.

While compradorism remains their dominant outlook, there is also an element of opposition to the major imperialist powers. A disgruntlement at not being treated as a 'power' in its own rights is seen. Unsurprisingly enough, this sentiment has its colonial precedent. In British India, highly educated individuals from the elite and middle classes were similarly upset over being kept out of the higher echelons of the colonial administration.

Distinctly different from this brand of pseudo-nationalism, of comprador Indiannes/Bharatheeyatha, there is the patriotic sentiments of the vast majority. Their Indianness/Bharatheeyatha resides, is internalised and expressed, through their respective

national cultures, mediated through caste and religion. When speaking of national culture these mediations should never be left out. The Pulayar's Malayalitham is not exactly identical to that of the Nairs, though both are Malayalees. This reflects on the expressions of their Bharatheeytha/Indianness. So too, the Marathi's Bharatheeyatha and that of the Punjabi have their distinct expressions and nuances. Being Marathi, Bengali, Tamil etc. *and* Indian, the one compliments the other as sung by the poet. And similar to his choice of words and arrangement, the privileging of Indianness/Bharatheeyatha as the overarching identity, while placing their own national identities at a lower rung, is quite common. This, despite the internalisation of Bharatheeyatha through Malayalitham, Marathi asmita and so on. This tension explodes and their real roots comes out occasionally, as violent chauvinist sectarianism directed against the 'others', unconcerned over their being fellow 'Bharatheeyas'. Two factors underlie the peculiar ordering seen here. One, the unfinished business of nation formation due to internal weaknesses of their formative processes. This was compounded by the violent disarticulation inflicted by colonialism. Two, an aggressive promotion of Brahmanism in the form of a homogenised Hinduism and chauvinist Indian nationalism.

Ostensibly championing the country's integrity, placing and prestige in the world arena as a 'power', this hegemonic ideology of Indian nationalism in fact manifests comprador/feudal subservience to imperialism. The status sought is nothing more than that of a loyal camp follower of one or the other imperialist power, presently the US. There is the basic question of whether any country should ever aspire to be a 'power' lording over others. Apart from that, the very thrust of this ideology is totally at variance with the patriotism of the people. The more it is allowed room, the more their patriotism will be weakened. They will be pushed towards serving as cannon fodder for the Indian State and imperilism. They will remain within the hegemonic consensus legitimising it. A Bharatheeyatha/Indianness that is

anti-imperialist and democratic can only emerge and flourish on the foundations given by the various national and ethnic peoples of this country, who unite voluntarily, free from forced integration, free from compradorism and Brahmanism, free from false imaginings of an 'Akhand Bharath', free from the chauvinist illusion of becoming a 'superpower.

Before ending, let me reproduce a quote, as defence, in anticipation of any sedition case which may be in preparation:

"*Maharashtri Bal Dvij - kulaj Gangadhar-suta*
Vase punya kshetri Tilak upname shurthirat."[85]

That was Tilak, signing of his magnum opus the 'Geeta Rahasya'; an honest Bharatheeya, beyond doubt.

§

85 "The Maharashtrian named Bal, son of the twice-born Gangadhar, residing at the sacred place (Pune) and having the surname Tilak".

The Credentials of Patriotism

In recent years, the singing of 'Vande Mataram' has been aggressively promoted as the touchstone of true patriotism. Those who object are branded as 'anti-national'. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and various other Hinduvadi organisations are the most active in the business. They, however, are not alone.

'Vande Mataram' was penned by the novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. It was the anthem of the 'Sanatani' guerrillas of his late 19th century novel 'Anand Math'. The song, as it is sung today, has been truncated to its first stanza. This was done by Subhash Chandra Bose on the advice of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore had suggested this edit to avoid stanzas that could antagonise non-Hindus. The idea was to sanitise the song, so to say, in order to make it acceptable to all as a 'national' song.

'Vande Mataram' was already a favourite of militant nationalists who had taken up arms against the British Raj. It became more popular during the protest movement against the partition of Bengal Province by the British in 1905. Yet its appeal still remained restricted due to its overtly Hindu symbolism and message. Hence Tagore's proposal. The first stanza of the song is devoted to a description of the bountiful nature of the country portrayed as Mother. Tagore must have reasoned that this would be palatable to all, regardless of religious inclinations. However, the matter is not so simple.

'Anand Math' is loosely based on the late 18th century Sannyasi revolt in Bengal. The Muslim general, who had betrayed Siraj-ud-dualah in the battle of Plassey, had been installed in power by the British East India Company. The Company became the de facto ruler and adopted harsh measures to collect taxes,

despite dire conditions of famine. That was the context of the Sannyasi revolt. It was mainly directed against the British East India Company. However, in the novel's narrative this is set within a broader communal attack on Muslims *per se*. Bankim Chandra gave some very graphic accounts: '(The spies sent by the Sanatanis said) "Brothers, will you worship Vishnu?" Thus gathering bands of twenty or twenty-five they came to the villages of the Mussulmans and burnt their houses. When the Mussulmans were busy in saving their lives the Sanatanis used to plunder their all and distribute the plunder among the new initiates of Vishnu.'[86] His depiction of the scene after the victorious overthrow of the Muslim ruler is blood curling, 'The villagers began chasing the Mussulmans wherever they met them. Some banded themselves together, went to the Muslim quarters, set fire to their cottages and looted their all. Many Mussulmans were killed, many shaved off their beards, smeared themselves with Ganges clay and began singing "Hari Hari." If asked they said, "I am a Hindu."'[87]

'Anand Math' projected Bankim Chandra's vision for the 'Motherland'. It would have to be a Hindu Rashtra, hopefully cleared of Muslims. It would realise the re-enthroning of 'Sanatan Dharma'. Bankim Chandra's 'Sanatan Dharma' was a sample of aggressive Brahmanism, in a Vaishnavi garb. Speaking through his protagonist he differentiated it from the version of Vaishnavism widely seen around him — 'That is the Vaishnavism of Chaitanya Dev. The Vaishnavism which was the outcome of the atheistic Buddhist religion — non-violence is its sign. The

86 'Anand Math', Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, English translation by Sri Aurobindo and Barindra Kumar Gosh, 2010 Reprint by Ashir Prakashan, Ebook (PDF) Edition by Auro e-books, 2016; p 96. (Originally, I had given translations made from a Hindi edition of the 'Ananda Math', available in the prison library. They have been replaced by quotes from Aurobindo's English translation since I think it's better to be as authentic as possible, given the sensitive nature of the topic and the contents of the quotes.)

87 Ibid, p 136.

sign of true Vaishnavism is the suppression of the wicked and the salvation of the world. Because Vishnu is the preserver of the world.'[88]

All of this should be enough and more reason for any true patriot to reject the anthem of the 'Sanatanis'. It did not draw on national interests. Rather, it was inspired by a rabid Brahmanical communal vision. To portray its song as a national anthem is to mock the people. But that is not all. What exactly was the nature of the 'nationalism' projected by Bankim Chandra? Towards the end of the novel there is an illuminating exchange between its protagonist and his mentor. As a follow up to the victory over the Muslim king the former proposes a further advance to clear out the British in order to establish a Sanatan regime. His mentor opposed this.

He explains, 'Unless the English rule this land, there is no chance of the renaissance of the eternal religion... The true Hindu religion is based on knowledge, not on action. That knowledge is of two kinds; — secular or external and spiritual or internal. The inner spiritual knowledge is the chief part of true religion. But unless secular knowledge about the outside world comes the other knowledge about the inner world cannot grow... In order to restore the eternal religion, at the outset knowledge of the material world must be preached. There is not much material knowledge in the country now, there is none capable of teaching it. We are not adepts in spreading popular education. So the necessary knowledge has got to be brought and introduced from other countries. The English are past masters in the knowledge pertaining to the material world... They are adepts in the art of teaching. So we shall make the British our rulers. Through English education our people attaining knowledge of the material world will also be made capable of understanding inner knowledge. There will then be no obstacle against preaching the true eternal religion. True religion will, under the circumstances, grow spontaneously. So long as that does not happen, so long

88 Ibid, p 81.

as the Hindus do not become wise, worthy and strong, British rule will endure. The subjects will be happy under the British control. They will pursue their religious life without hindrance. So, O wise one! Desist from fighting the British and follow me.'[89] He went on to explain, 'The English are now merchants, they are busy earning money, they do not care to undertake the responsibility of government. Under the pressure of this Sanatan rebellion they will be compelled to undertake the responsibility of governing this country...The Sanatan rebellion has come only to put the British on the throne.'[90]

Bankim Chandra thus relayed, with all conviction, the 'civilising mission' claims of British colonialism. Deep spirituality is admitted for the ancient Orient. But it is deemed to be woefully backward in terms of the modern. To progress, it must be shepherded by the Occident. Taking off from this Orientalist theme Brahmanism envisaged its return to unrestricted power, hanging on to the coattails of colonialism. Diehard Brahmanism was now modulated by abject comprador adulation of the colonial master. This newly acquired comprador vision is seen in the unquestioned acceptance of colonialism's contemptuous dismissal of the Orient's practical, worldly knowledge. For the colonialists this was intentional. It was an essential component of the colonisation of the subject's mind. For the Brahmanist revivalist too it was equally intentional; born of servility in their case.

As we saw in Bankim Chandra's narration, it even went to the extent of denying the fairly substantial achievements in worldly knowledge by the sub-continent till the recent past. Hardly a century or two previous to his novel, the skills, the craft, the range and quality of products seen here were far superior to those of the West. This would certainly have been known to Bankim Chandra's generation. Yet, leave alone the sub-continent's rich 'external' knowledge, even in the matter of spirituality he needed

89 Ibid, p 161.
90 Ibid, p. 162.

the coloniser as mediator. Its very revitalisation, re-establishment is predicated on colonial rule — to eliminate or suppress the Muslim 'other', to bring in discipline among the Hindus, and provide necessary 'external' knowledge for Sanatan Dharma to flourish.

Bankim Chandra held important positions in the colonial administration. But the views he upheld were by no means restricted to people in similar circumstances. He was one among a new breed of comprador intellectuals. All of them were from the upper most layers of *savarna* castes. All of them considered British rule as a necessity, even a blessing. In fact, this was a constant theme of the so called 'Indian' renaissance represented by Raja Rammohan Roy and contemporaries. There were, of course, variations. For some like Bankim Chandra, British rule was necessary even for the revitalisation of Brahmanism. For others, the spiritual supremacy of Brahmanism was intact. The West had to learn from it, while the East had to be tutored in its science.

Over the years there was a shift. The 'virtues' and 'benefits' of British rule continued to be extolled. Meanwhile resentment at being kept away from the levers of power was also growing. It soon coalesced into demands for 'self-rule'. That didn't mean independence. It was a demand for dominion status within the British empire. This remained the platform of diverse upper class trends within the anti-British struggle. Even those known as representatives of the 'militant' wing remained within this restricted frame. For instance, when Bal Gangadhar Tilak made his famous court statement "Swaraj is my birth right", what he had in mind was Home Rule, i.e. dominion status. There was no question of independence. His close associate Lala Lajpat Rai's 'The Political Future of India' drew on the Morley and Montagu-Chemsfford reports to plead for dominion status. Actually, '*swaraj*' originally meant independence. For example, the Marathi kingdom established by Shivaji after overthrowing Mughal rule was often referred to as '*swaraj*'. The comprador intellectuals

and politicians later gutted '*swaraj*' of its real meaning. Over time they established it in popular imagination as 'self-rule', as dominion status within the British Empire.

Though part of the 'militant camp', Tilak firmly placed himself within the legal stream. What about those who took up armed activities? We have the example of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, imprisoned in the Andaman Cellular Jail for his revolutionary activities. In 1914 he sent a memorandum to the Governor General, following the outbreak of World War I. Savarkar was professedly trying to take advantage of the dire situation faced by the British. He wrote, 'It was our aim to take Hindustan to the status of a free nation and this remains so. However, we have not taken any oath that the path of bloody armed resistance must be relied on at all costs to realise this aim. Not only that, if there were the possibility of any other solution being fruitful we would not have adopted armed resistance... Since any Empire which interweaves several races and nations under one rule will be useful for realising that aim [of achieving unity of the human race], we have no desire at all to oppose such an Empire under whose shelter those different nations can enjoy such freedom as can be supportive of their own purposes ... Within Hindustan, which is present in that which is called the British Empire, if the country can enjoy ... freedom according to its own nature ... we will then consider it our duty to remain committed to that Empire.. Such powers should immediately be given to the Hindustan nation so that it can enjoy that freedom. If, due to the war situation, nothing else can be done, then colonial self-government can be given to Hindustan.'[91]

While quoting from his memorandum, Savarkar also gave an account of the thought process underlying it. The revolutionaries had been looking forward to a war between Germany and Britain since long. The expectation was that this would give them

91 'Majhi Janmatep' (My Life Imprisonment), Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, 27th Marathi edition, Parchure Prakasan Mandir, Mumbai, 2011; p 214; words in square brackets added.

an opportunity to achieve their aims with German help. Being imprisoned and deprived of that opportunity, just when that hoped for event finally unfolded, was a big disappointment. Even then, he and his associates in jail decided to try and make the most out of the situation. But the information that Turkey had entered the war, allying with Germany, caused a big change in his thinking. In his words, '... (B)ecause of this, the form of the plan [of intervention] I had worked out in my mind was greatly changed. On hearing that Turkey had joined the war against England, it suddenly brought to my mind, well acquainted with the hidden Pan Islamic ambition of the Muslims, the fear of a new danger which could be seen looming up against Hindustan. Because of Turkey's entry into the war, the possibility of Germany's hand reaching Hindustan and putting British rule in great difficulty in Hindustan was becoming possible. Inadvertently, this was favourable to my immediate plan of action. Because, due to the changes, England would face the compulsion to fulfil, on its own, Hindustan's just demands. Otherwise Hindustan would get the opportunity to fulfil its desires by itself in the midst of the Anglo-German war. But, in this intense clash, the locust like Muslim attack on Russia could get tempted to invade Hindustan. The evil efforts of the Hindustani Muslims to re-establish lost Muslim rule in Hindustan could then become somewhat fruitful.'[92]

This was the thinking behind the memorandum. Following it to its logical conclusion, Savarkar specifically informed the British that he and his associates would be willing to join the army to defend Hindustan against the foreign Muslim forces like the Turks and Afghans.[93] Evidently, in Savarkar's 'patriotism', the

92 Ibid, p 283.

93 Ibid, p 285. Incidentally, supporting British war efforts was standard policy of all shades of comprador politics throughout the colonial period. The 1942 'Quit India' movement and consequent opposition to war efforts was an exception. A build-up of mass anger against the devastating plunder being carried out by the British Raj to support the war was one factor underlying it. The other was a growing thinking among Congress leaders that Japan could soon become victorious. The CPI opposed the

main concern was not the overthrow of existent British rule. Even a remote possibility of rule by some Muslims was taken to be far more dangerous. A foreign rule could be accommodated, even defended. But that of some Muslims, even if they are 'Hindustani', can never be tolerated. Such was his views. They really had nothing to do with patriotism or nationalism, even of a narrow chauvinist type. It was rabid communalism of a comparadorised Brahmanist Hinduvad. The unwavering continuity from what we saw in Bankim Chandra's 'Sanatani' dream is all too obvious.

The Indian National Congress (INC) under M.K. Gandhi's leadership advanced a moderate version of Brahmanism, in place of the Hinduvadis aggressive stance. Yet, so far as the matter of independence was concerned, it too was content with dominion status. Standing opposed to the servility of these compradors, the slogan of independence was raised by the revolutionary nationalists and communists. Since, *'swaraj'* no longer meant independence, a new term *'poorna swaraj'* (meaning complete independence) had to be coined to convey this. It caught on with the masses and became a popular demand. The rise of various non-Congress movements from the bottom layers of society added strength. Threatened by the possibility of losing hegemony over the anti-British struggle, the INC too adopted this slogan in 1930.

'Poorna swaraj' as formulated by the revolutionary nationalists meant a total break from British imperialism. The communists further deepened it. They called for a rupture from the whole imperialist system and destruction of feudalism. None of this was meant by the INC. Its adoption of '*poorna swaraj'* as a slogan was a tactical ploy. It was intended to mend its frayed image and keep the masses away from the path of national liberation.

Though it is claimed that India became independent on the 15th of August, 1947, the truth is something else. Even as a

war when it broke out. But, after Britain allied with the Soviet Union against the Axis Powers, its leadership abandoned this position and supported British war efforts in India.

matter of formal status, it was actually a dominion in the British empire till 1950! If not for the high tide of anti-imperialist, anti-feudal struggles of that period it might well have remained so. The declaration of a sovereign republic in 1950 settled the matter of formal subjugation to the British empire. But the undeclared, indirect dependence on imperialism as a whole goes on without fail.

This then is the reality of the ruling classes' idea of patriotism. How does it get transmitted through the institutions of the Indian State? Let us have a look at one of them, the armed forces. It is portrayed as the most patriotic one among all state institutions. Criticism made against it is branded as 'anti-national'. But, again, what exactly is the 'national' tradition upheld by it? Some recent events will be of help in assessing this.

The Israeli prime minister's visit to India had become an occasion for Narendra Modi to once again commemorate the Haifa assault. (He had already done it while visiting Israel earlier.) This was a notable battle of the First World War. The Hyderabad, Jodhpur and Mysore Lancers as part of the 25 Imperial Cavalry Brigade of the British Army had participated in it. On September 23, 1918 they succeeded in seizing the town defeating German, Turkish and Austro-Hungarian troops. This facilitated the advance of Allied forces. In military terms this assault was noteworthy in being victoriously carried out by an ill-equipped force against a well armed superior one. Modi characterised it as an example of the 'great Indian tradition of selfless sacrifices and penance'.

To serve whom? For what purpose? Sacrifice and penance would hardly have been on the minds of those troops. The ill treatment and discriminatory conditions of service they and other soldiers of the British Indian Army suffered, even when engaged in war duties, are well documented. They were forced to join the army and go to war fronts, purely because of their dire poverty. Shedding blood for the capture of Haifa by the Lancers

and other feats of Indian soldiers did not serve the interests of the people of India in anyway. It served the interests of their oppressor, the British empire. So what is being conveyed when the service of these soldiers as cannon fodder of the British empire is hailed as a 'great Indian tradition'? Is this patriotism or comprador perversion?

The case of those Lancers is not an isolated one. Commemoration of one or the other battle waged as part of the British Indian Army is a well entrenched tradition throughout all the wings of the Indian armed forces. Even those waged to suppress Indians fighting for their independence are celebrated. This may be compared to its mirror opposite. Not a single instance of rebellion by Indian troops in the British Indian armed forces is commemorated by the Indian State or by any of the leading political parties of the ruling classes. Jawaharlal Nehru and other Congress leaders made a big show of defending the Indian National Army (INA) officers accused of treason by the British. But no soldier of the INA was ever taken back into the Indian Army. None of the cheerleaders of patriotism have seen anything reprehensible in all of this; excluding a sole instance.

Exactly two centuries ago, in January 1818, the British garrison stationed at Khadki (Pune) repulsed a contingent of the Peshwa's army, nearly four times its size. The repercussions of the battle were far reaching. It hastened the eventual downfall of the Peshwa's Marathi kingdom. The British force was mainly composed of Mahars, a prominent Marathi Dalit caste. A victory column was put up by the British at Bhima Koregaon to commemorate that battle. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar visited it in 1927. He had been vigorously campaigning for reviving the Mahar regiment of the British Indian Army. Over time, annual gatherings at the memorial on January 1 to commemorate the victory over the Peshwa's army has become a focal point of Dalit assertion in Maharashtra. Its bicentenary was celebrated on a larger scale this year. It was preceded by a commemoration meeting having all-India representation. The memorial march

on the 1st was attacked by Hinduwadi forces. That triggered off a burst of pent up Dalit anger in the form of a spontaneous, militant, statewide bandh. The matter is still live at the time of my writing this article. In the context of the topic of patriotism this article deals with, the Hinduwadis' justification for their opposition is specially noteworthy. That battle had aided the downfall of the Maratha Kingdom and paved the way for British rule over the whole subcontinent. Therefore, they argue, it is anti-national to commemorate it and wrong to portray it as a victory of the Mahars. Is that so?

Many battles were won for the British by natives of the sub-continent. A comparison will show that the Mahar's claim to own the Khadki battle is by far more justifiable than any other. The Brahmin Peshwa regime was most oppressive in its casteist practices. Under Shivaji, the Mahars had joined in the fight against the Moguls. They could rightfully claim a role in the establishment of the Marathi Kingdom. But under the Peshwas they were removed from the army. They had to observe obnoxious practices of untouchability never before seen in that land. For the Mahars, to take on that enemy and defeat it in battle must essentially have been an exhilarating act; even if it was serving the establishment of another oppressive rule. The same definitely cannot be said of any other — for example the battle of Kohima, where a Japanese-INA assault was defeated by the British Indian Army during World War 2. Nor can it be said about the aerial bombardment on rebellious tribal people of the (then) North-West Frontier Province (presently in Pakistan) or independence fighters in Medinipur (West Bengal) during the 1942 Quit India movement. Yet, battles like the one in Kohima are commemorated by the Indian state. Participation in such bombardments are honourably mentioned while recounting the service record of Indian officers who took part in them.

Among all the commemorations of British victories annually done in the country, Bhima-Koregaon alone is branded by Hinduwadis as 'anti-national'. For Bankim Chandra and

Savarkar, the nation was determined communally. Now it is being further 'fine tuned'. It is asserted that the nation essentially belongs, not to Hindus in general, but more specifically to the *savarnas*. Anything hurting their interests is 'anti-national'.

This casteist narrative is surely unacceptable to the vast majority, including a considerable chunk among the *savarnas*. Even then, the playing up of the 'foreigner-native' binary by Hinduwadis may get an audience. So let us take a closer look at this. How would one determine the foreigner? The Marathi Kingdom itself was certainly not 'native' in large parts of its territory. Both in its southern and northern extensions it was a foreign rule for the people of those regions. Giving it a 'Hindu' colour won't redress this. The course of the establishment and expansion of the Marathi Kingdom had also meant the overrunning of other Hindu Kingdoms. The Peshwas could lay claim on a patriotism to the extent they resisted colonial aggression. But then it should also be noted that this was of a very restrictive type. Moreover it was very regressive. Shivaji had already set a high standard of inclusive patriotism through the independence war waged under his leadership against the Moguls. It drew in the broad masses, including the oppressed castes. Despite this, the Peshwas remained rigid on their Brahmanist exclusivity. Their notion of 'homeland' could never belong to the Dalit and other oppressed castes. It would be foreign to them.

The Peshwa's resistance to the British was similar to that of Tippu of Mysore, Pazhassi of Kottayam (Northern Keralam), the Rani of Jhansi and many others. Some were more inclusive. Yet all of them fought the British to protect and preserve their caste-feudal social relations and way of life.[94] That was the actual context of their patriotism. However, in conditions of colonialism, their resistance acquired an objective role far different from their subjective desires. They sowed the seeds for the emergence of a

94 Tippu was quite ahead of his times. He initiated the restructuring of agricultural relations. He also began to build up an armament industry with some advanced technology for those times, like rocket science.

new type of patriotism. In proportion to the masses direct entry into the anti-colonial struggle this patriotism increasingly cut across geographical, social boundaries. It became more and more inclusive and democratic. Simultaneously, another dynamic too was operating.

The partial transformation of caste-feudalism that took place under colonial rule weakened Brahmanist orthodoxy. It created some openings for the oppressed castes to advance. For them, British rule was a welcome break in the Brahmanist social order. They strove to widen it by all means. There was also the reinforcement or refurbishment of oppressive practices under colonialism, as well as the addition of new ones. This went to create opposition to colonial rule among these sections too. But the neo-Brahmanism of the comprador and feudal elites blocked any possibility of a broad link-up. They counter-posed 'national interests' to the democratic demands of the oppressed castes. Leaders of Dalit and other oppressed castes who insisted on ending the caste system were accused of pursuing 'narrow' aims as opposed to the 'broader', 'superior' concerns of the country.

For the oppressed castes, a nation which would not have equal place for them was unacceptable. If the end of foreign rule meant a loss of their newly acquired social momentum, they would prefer to stand apart from what appeared to them as an 'un-freedom struggle'. This sharp fracture was rooted in the sub-continent's socio-economic particularities and reinforced by neo-Brahmanism. The British did their best to aggravate it. But they didn't create it, even though their colonial rule had facilitated it.

For the Dalits, the Bhima-Koregaon victory column has long ceased to be a symbol of the British Raj. In their popular imagination it is the symbol of the defeat of the Brahmanist oppressors by their forefathers. It is a memorial to their fighting capacity, valour, and tenacity. It is the promise of the destruction of Brahmanism, its structures and values — provided the

oppressed stand up and fight back. This narrative shaped by Dalit resistance slices through the false binary of 'foreigner-native' erected by the Hinduvadis. To be very much native and yet suffer an enforced 'foreignness', excluded from possible public spaces and denied common rights – how can anyone be 'patriotic' about this state of affairs?

Brahmanism is a deeply divisive ideology. This is intrinsic to it. The projection of a Hinduness as opposed to the Muslim 'other' can at the most temporarily paper over the divisions it is rooted in and sustain. They inevitably leap out sooner or later in all their ugliness. Aggressive Brahmanism gives it an even more ferocious thrust. The present RSS rule by proxy at the Centre and over large parts of the country through BJP governments, attests to this dynamics. The more aggressive the attacks, the more fiercer and broader the resistance. This was seen on a number of occasions. The recent outburst of Dalit anger, sparked off by the Supreme Court's dilution of the SC-ST Atrocities Act, was the latest. Not just Dalits, Muslims, the Left, various sections of the society, even from the topmost layer itself, are coming out in opposition. The countrywide mobilisation seen on the Kathua incident was not just responding to the brutality inflicted on a child. It was additionally spurred on by the exposure of the heinous use of rape and murder by the Hinduwadis to terrorise and drive out a Muslim tribal community.

We are witnessing a very broad stirring up of democratic strivings. Here and there it takes a militant turn. The participation of youth is noteworthy. It demolishes the fake thesis of 'de-politicisation of the younger generations'. Mobilisation and protest is mostly spontaneous, initiated by small, local groups. Wider participation is gained through social media. More often than not, the parliamentary opposition is forced to tag along. This churning up is yet to take the shape of a new movement, either at the state level or countrywide. Yet it has already become a major factor in the political realm. Every political party has to necessarily take it into account and articulate its response.

This is indeed a significant development. But there is also something missing. The claim being made on the nation by the Hinduwadis is not being challenged at its most essential level. Of course, their cowardly absence from the anti-British struggle, the way they complemented British 'divide and rule' through their communal demand for a 'Hindu Rashtra' and similar treacherous acts and policies have been wildly criticised and exposed. But beyond all of this there is the most basic issue of defining national interests, patriotism, in terms of rupturing from the world imperialist system. This is the gaping hole in the Hinduwadis' 'national narrative'. Its lineage goes back all the way up to the earliest crop of comprador intellectuals.

An explicit, aggressive entrenchment of Brahmanism, with all of its casteist, communal, patriarchal, racist tones suitably adapted to the present, is the defining specificity of the Hinduvadis' 'nation'. But Brahmanism is not its sole preserve. It lies at the core of the ruling classes' ideological outlook. Thus the Congress stream too accommodates and promotes it, though more implicitly and less aggressively. Both are united in excluding opposition to imperialism. It is this comprador take on the nation, on patriotism, that should be targeted. Under conditions of the imperialist world system, to be meaningful, patriotism in a third world country must root itself in the struggle against that system. Unlike in the past, control and exploitation are no longer direct. But that hasn't mitigated their toxic effects in the least.

Rather than being fixated on debating growth figures, the very nature of the economy should be probed. Is it making the country self-reliant? Or is it tightening dependence? Are the jobs that are being created (even if at meagre pace) allowing an all round expression of our youth's potential? Or are their brains and skills serving to fatten some transnational corporation or comprador monopoly? Whether 'Made in India' of the Congress or 'Make in India' of the RSS, they neither served, nor will serve, India or its people. As for jingoist talk on waging war on two

fronts, a stock taking of past wars will show how imperialist arms dealers let out their belts while we Indians (and other South Asians) had to tighten ours.

The fracture keeping apart the 'national' and 'democratic' demands of the people needs to be healed. The two must draw strength from each other and be unified within a single torrent. A powerful counter narrative of patriotism will have a very important role in achieving this.

(May 2018)

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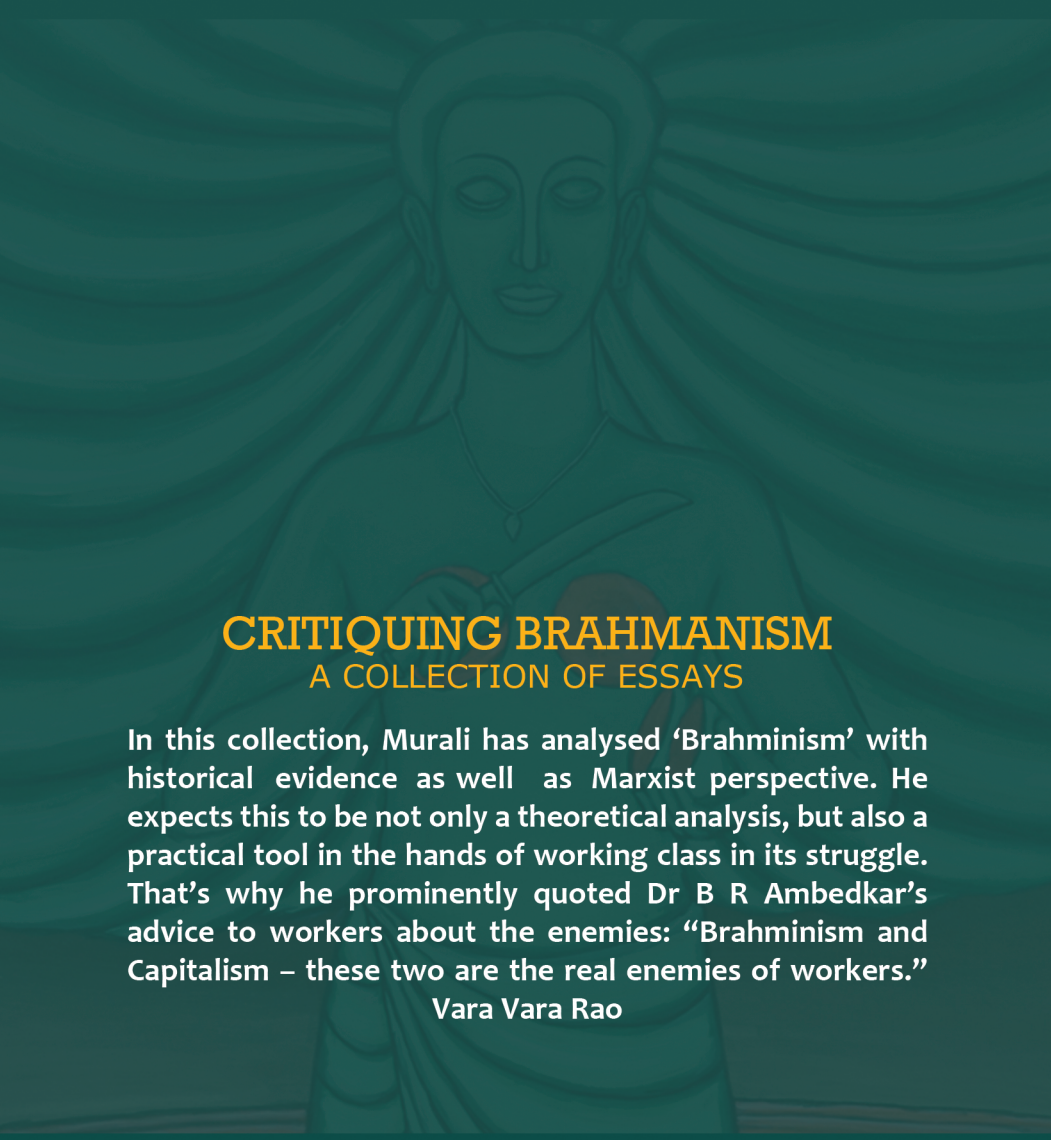
T. Murali

The artist is noted for his piercing depiction of Brahmanist oppression and evocative portrayal of resistance against it. 'Nangeli the Great', featured on the cover, is the second work in his Nangeli series (2013). Nangeli was an Ezhava woman (late 19th century Cherthala, Keralam) who sliced off her breasts in protest against the breast-tax, one among several obnoxious casteist poll taxes imposed by the *savarna* Travancore monarchy. The place where her house stood still bears the name *mulachiparambu* (the land of the breasted one).



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